

ACME

Winter No. 7

STARTLING MYSTERY^{.50c} STORIES

UNUSUAL - EERIE - STRANGE

BRIDE OF THE PEACOCK

by E. HOFFMANN
PRICE

Doctor Satan in
**THE MAN
WHO CHAINED
THE
LIGHTNING**

by PAUL
ERNST

THOSE WHO
SEEK

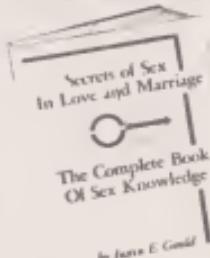
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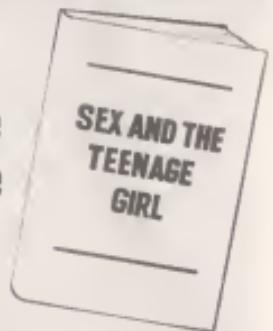
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STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES

Volume 2

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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mand over others, renewed health and vigor and all the rest THAT THESE EXERCISES ARE BUILDING UP IN YOUR BODY AS THOUGH IT WERE A GIANT GENERATOR!

2) And, even more important, by the very nature of these forces, YOU CANNOT TAP THEM UNLESS YOU ARE WILLING TO PUT THEM TO WORK FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S GOOD AS WELL AS YOUR OWN! If you wish complete control over others to direct them for their own good, these techniques will give it to you; but if you wish to turn them to evil ends, you will gain nothing! If you wish huge sums of money to build with, to make your visions a reality, these techniques will give them to you; but if you wish this money for nothing but selfish ends, you will get nothing!

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were to pursue it 24 hours a day the wrong way!

Why some men's dreams always come true, and other's always fail. Why fools often make fortunes from situations wise men avoid like the plague. Why some people attract good luck like a magnet, and others can only borrow bad luck. There IS a key! And page 55 has it!

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the editor's page

IF YOU HAVE READ the small print at the bottom of the contents page (that is what we call the indicia; it gives the vital information about the magazine) then you have already noticed that *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES* is accepting subscriptions. At \$2.50 for six issues, you save the cover price of one, and will not have to wonder whether your local newsdealer will get the next issue of SMS. While we are getting slightly better coverage on newsstands than before, we may not yet have been able to persuade the wholesaler in your district to carry our publications.

Why doesn't the wholesaler carry the magazine? Not because wholesalers are nasty and mean—it's very likely that he has no idea that there may be a demand for little publications like *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*, *MAGAZINE OF HORROR AND FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION*. And there isn't the money to be made in handling magazines like this that there is in *TV GUIDE*, *LIFE*, *TIME*, etc.

But if your wholesaler is a good businessman (and the chances are that he is) then he'll be willing to try distributing a magazine you say you want to buy. After all, if you go into the store, or stop at the stand, to get SMS, etc., you might also pick up one of the other publications he handles, too. There's more than just a single item at stake.

So, first of all, ask your local newsdealer to get SMS for you. If he says, "I'd like to, but my wholesaler doesn't have it," then get his name and address and write a friendly letter to him, saying that you deal at such-and-such a place and that the proprietor would willingly get SMS, MOH, FSF for you and your friends, but he says the wholesaler doesn't carry it. Can't you, Mr. Wholesaler, arrange to have these magazines on sale?

It might be still better to make a personal visit to the gentleman, but a letter will do if you haven't the time, or (as might be the case) don't feel as persuasive in person as you do at the keys of the typewriter. Nothing wrong in this.

If you are a science fictionist, you may recognize this suggestion; it is one being urged upon science fiction readers and writers by the Science Fiction Writers of America, and was the subject of Damon Knight's recent address to a large group of enthusiasts. And if you care about SMS you can help both yourself and us, of course, by subscribing; but you can help still more by seeing if you can get the magazines you like on sale in your neighborhood. If the local wholesaler says "No, sorry," then you're no worse off

than before; if he's willing to try it, there's a chance for us to grow.

I HAVE BEEN studying a matter we talked about last time—the question of whether verse (when we run it) should be listed on the preference page. Actually, very few of the active readers have come out and said, "Yes, we want verse listed." And very few have specifically said, "No, please don't list the verse." But the way the ballots in the past two issues have been filled out have pretty well indicated your real feelings. A majority of you simply left that space blank, and made no comment to indicate why.

My own feeling all along has been that verse (and other departments) should not be put into competition with the fiction, simply because they are disparate material. Nonetheless, had even a plurality of you shown your desire for this listing, by making use of it, I would have gone along. As it is, the only sensible thing seems to be to drop it. Henceforth, verse will not be listed on the preference page.

MANY OF YOU have asked for a "coming next issue" page, such as we have in *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*. There wasn't room in the last issue, but this time I found a one page hole when I laid out the issue. So here it is; and you'll see it except where that one page isn't there, and there is not enough space at the end of any story, etc., to run it.

What I did in the preliminary layout was to leave a page open for the announcements. The house ads must go in; we need to let the new reader (and there are some every issue) know about our other titles, and about back issues of SMS. The letter department is also laid out. Then we start fitting the stories in. Now the space set aside for the two departments is considered only tentatively filled. But suppose the stories I have set up just fit neatly into the rest of the space—wonderful! Perfect fit.

If I'm one page over—well, we can either cut back on the letters, or eliminate the announcement page, or split it half and half. And so it goes. Usually, there is a story or two which won't fit in no matter how I juggle things around. But the departments (and the editorial, too) are considered expendable, if by cutting them down, or leaving them out, I can get in a story which would otherwise be left out.

If there are two alternatives—one story which would crowd out the departments, another which would fit in with them—then it's a case of which of the two seems to me to go better with the stories that are already "in". But, you see, crowding the departments out would not have given you an extra story, in this instance, as some readers who have objected to the departments have thought. One of the two stories wouldn't have fitted in anyway. RAWL

The Bride Of The Peacock

by E. Hoffmann Price

"MADEMOISELLE," said Pierre d'Artois after a moment's reflection, "there is really no reason for your being alarmed at repeatedly dreaming that you are opening a grave. After all, a dream . . ."

"Monsieur," she demanded, "does one in a dream break one's fingernails? Just look!"

She thrust her hands, fingers extended, squarely before our eyes. The nails were ragged and broken, and beneath them was a distinct trace of verdigris.

"I left them just as they were this morning, verdigris and all, to show you how I've been pawing at that door again. My new slippers and gown were torn, and

Night after night, she dreamed of trying to open a door—to awaken with ragged, broken, and soiled fingernails.

The January 1925 issue of *WEIRD TALES* presented a bizarre and unusual oriental story. *The Rajah's Gift* by a new author, E. HOFFMANN PRICE. A year later, the February 1926 issue presented a short-short story entitled, *The Word of Santiago*, where we are first introduced to a tough, aristocratic old Frenchman named Pierre D'Artois, who seems to have a propensity for getting involved with Devil worshippers of the Persian variety—the followers of Malik Tawus, also called Melek Taos, in the pages of WT, though not by Mr. Price. There were six d'Artois stories after that brief introductory tale, all of them novelet length except the two-part *Satan's Garden*, which can be called a short novel. D'Artois also appeared in magazines such as *STRANGE DETECTIVE STORIES*, so we cannot presently tell you how many there were in all. Having re-read all of them presently available, we decided that *Bride of the Peacock* ought to be as effective an introduction to d'Artois to you as it was to us, in our freshman year with WT.

soiled with green mold from kneeling before it. It's driving me mad!"

In her eyes was a terrible, haunted look that made them a starless, somber midnight.

Pierre d'Artois studied first the slim white fingers with their marred nails, and then the dark, surpassing loveliness of Diane

Livaudais. "But where do you walk?"

She shrugged her faultless shoulders, and made a despairing gesture of the hand.

"If I only knew! But I don't. First there was someone talking to me in my sleep. Though I couldn't ever recollect, exactly, what the voice said to me, I always had the impression when I awoke that there was a grave that I was to open. And somehow I felt that it was Etienne who called me. You know, Monsieur d'Artois. I was very fond of Etienne, and living in that house he gave me, it was only natural that I'd have him on my mind."

"When," queried Pierre, "did Etienne give you that house on Rue Lachepaillet?"

"It's over two years ago, 1928. Several months after he disappeared, I received a letter from him, from Marrakesh, saying that he was seriously wounded, and that if he died, he wanted me to live in his house on Rue Lachepaillet. Then, a month or so later, I learned that he was dead. Just a clipping from a paper in Marrakesh—a French newspaper, you understand—and a note in Arabic, which I had Doctor Delaronde translate. It confirmed the clipping, saying that Etienne's last words had been that he wanted me

to have his house in Bayonne and the personal effects in it.

"So," she continued, "living in that legacy, and missing him terribly, I would easily dream of him, and wake with the sense of having heard his voice. I felt his presence, as though he were seeking to speak some final thought that his friend had not included in that scrap of Arabic script."

"By the way, have you those bits of paper?"

And then, as Mademoiselle Livaudais took them from her handbag, d'Artois continued, "The voice became more insistent?"

"Yes. Though it wasn't really a voice. I would awake with the feeling that someone had given an order. An overpowering will forcing me to some vague task I couldn't quite remember except for somehow associating it always with a grave. A task I couldn't accomplish and couldn't evade."

"And always Etienne's presence?"

"Yes and no," she answered. "I don't know. An oppressing confusion. A dominant, crushing will. Not like Etienne at all. He was domineering—you may have known him—but not in that remorseless way. He loved me. Almost as much as I loved him. But this is relentless, inhuman. Yet I sense Etienne in it."

"And . . ." She again extended her fingers. "This proves that just last night I was trying to open the door of a vault. As on so many other nights. Gown tattered. Slippers soiled. Verdigris under my nails. I'm weary. Weary to death."

"You should have seen me sooner."

"It was so outrageous. So I kept it to myself. But now I want you to find out where I am going, and why, before I lose my mind entirely."

Pierre rose and from a drawer in his desk took a tiny vial, a part of whose amber-colored contents he poured into a small, stemmed glass.

"Drink," he suggested. "It is a sedative. It will make you relax. You must relax. Look me full in the eye . . . better yet, look intently at the ring on my finger . . . then think of nothing at all . . ."

I noted then that Pierre had seated his visitor so that she faced a strong, glaring light.

"You are weary from trying to remember . . . Cease trying, and it will come to you . . ."

Pierre's voice was droning monotonously. "Don't try to remember . . . your are weary . . . weary . . . weary of trying . . . think of nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing at all," he persisted in soporific accents.

HER EYES WERE staring fixedly at the stone that flamed and pulsed dazzlingly on Pierre's hand. I'd never known Pierre to wear a diamond of any kind, much less that obtrusive, massive clot of fire.

Her lips half parted, and her breath came very slowly and rhythmically in cadence to Pierre's measured, purring syllables.

She was in a trance, induced by a drop of a hypnotic, and Pierre's compelling will.

Again he spoke, still with that murmuring monotony. "You are sleeping . . . soundly . . . deeply . . . so deeply that you won't waken until I call you . . . Do you understand?"

"Yes," she murmured, "I won't awaken . . . until . . . you call."

Then Pierre spoke in a voice of command. "It is now last night. The voice is speaking. Repeat it to me!"

Pierre leaned forward. His long fingers gripped the carved arms of his chair. Perspiration cropped out on his brow, now cleft with a saber-slash of a frown. Diane stirred uneasily, made a gesture of protest.

"You will speak and tell me. I command and you must obey!" he said solemnly and deeply as the chanted ritual of a high priest.

I myself was ready to leap or

yell from the terrific tension that moment by moment had been becoming more and more acute. I sensed a Power that was hammering at Pierre through Diane's resistance.

Then Pierre prevailed. The tension eased. She spoke in painfully clear-cut mechanical syllables: and in *Persian!* Not the colloquial Persian of which I knew a smattering, but the rich language of the old days.

"Now, answer," demanded Pierre, "as you have been answering."

"Etienne," she began in French, but as mechanical as before, "I can't find the spring. But I'll return tomorrow night and try again . . . I can't understand what you are saying . . . the drums are too loud, and they don't want me to understand . . ."

Etienne, Marquis de la Tour de Maracq, not dead in far-off Morocco, in some obscure tomb beyond the red walls of Marrakesh, but buried in one of the crypts that honeycomb the foundations of Bayonne. And she spent her nights answering him, and seeking him.

"But it couldn't be. The dead don't chant from their graves. It must be the hysteria of a woman mourning a dead lover," I insisted

to myself as I heard those outrageous words.

And then I looked at Pierre. My insistence mocked me. He trembled violently. His lips moved soundlessly, and he swayed slightly. He was exerting his supreme effort; but not another word could he drag from Diane. Pierre was beaten to a standstill.

He relaxed, and sighed deeply.

"Never to be too much damned *revenant*, I will meet you face-to-face, and you will speak to me!" he exclaimed.

He smiled that grim cold smile I once saw on his face as he crossed blades one unforgotten night with one who on that night ceased to be the most deadly swordsman in France.

Pierre struck his hands sharply together. "Enough! Awaken!" he ordered.

And, as Diane started, and blinked, and looked confusedly about her: "Tell me, *mademoiselle*, do you understand Persian?"

"Of course not," replied Diane. "But why?"

"You spoke Persian when I asked you to repeat . . ."

"Oh, did I say anything?"

"*Mais, certainement!* I commanded, and you spoke. And half the population of hell's backyard fought to break my control. But you spoke. Listen!"

Pierre repeated Diane's words.

"Did I say that?" she demanded incredulously.

"Indeed you did, *mademoiselle*," I assured her.

"Why, whoever heard of such a thing?"

"I, for one," affirmed Pierre. "An illiterate servant girl, delirious from fever, chanted ancient Hebraic, to the mystification of the doctors. It developed, finally, that she had once lived with the family of a German savant, and used to hear him reciting Hebraic texts: and this was impressed upon her subconscious mind, which was released in her delirium."

"Similarly someone has spoken Persian, either to your ear or to your mind at some time. Tell me, did you ever hear this, in any language?"

And Pierre recited:

*"When I am dead, open my grave
and see
The smoke that curls about thy
feet;*

*In my dead heart the fire still burns
for thee:
Yea, the smoke rises from my wind-
ing sheer."*

Diane shuddered. "Beautiful. But ghastly!"

As for me, I had heard and often admired that macabre Persian conceit. Yet this time an evil lurked

in the amorous fancy that Hafiz chanted to some girl in a garden of Shiraz nine hundred years ago.

"And you replied, 'I can't find the spring.' You said that the drums kept you from understanding. You did well to come to me. I will fight this to a finish, *its* or mine."

"Do you really think it's Etienne calling from yis grave?"

Diane asked this question in a hesitant voice, abashed at her outlandish query.

"*Mademoiselle,*" replied Pierre, "I am an old man, and I am none too positive about the impossibility of anything. Yet if he is speaking from Satan's throne room I will find him and silence him, for no honest lover would haunt you this way."

Pierre rang for his man, Raoul.

"My good friend, Landon, will join me in this campaign. We will be your guardians. Raoul will drive you home. And this evening we may see you, Landon and I!"

Diane graciously offered her hand. "Monsieur d'Artois, and you, Monsieur Landon, have restored my courage. I feel ever so much better. And do call tonight if you wish. *A bientot!*"

With a wave of her hand, and a smile for the moment free from the shadow of the grave, she followed Raoul to the Issotta coupe.

"PIERRE," I said as the door clicked behind Diane, "when she was in that trance, you might have commanded her to ignore the voice."

"Not at all! That would be like putting a plaster cast over an ulcer. I must rather find and exterminate the cause of this outrageous thing that talks to her and makes her sleep a wandering nightmare. Never think that she told us more than a fraction of what she does and hears and says in her sleep. Something fought me face-to-face as I commanded her to speak: and as she spoke, I suddenly lost control."

"The devil you say! I felt it myself . . . Do you believe . . ."

"Anything is possible in Bayonne," replied Pierre. "Anything may thunder and whisper from the ancient night of the passages and labyrinths that undermine Bayonne. Bayonne was founded by the Romans, whose legionaries worshipped Mithra and Cybele in subterranean crypts. The Saracens, the Spanish, the French, the Bearnaise have made this the playground of armies, and have enriched the earth with dead. This is all soil well raked over, and alive with strange seeds. Apostate priests have chanted the terrible foulness of the Black Mass, and mediaeval necromancers and thaumaturgists

have pursued their crafts in those unremembered red passages and vaults.

"Sometimes the Church hounded them to the surface, and roasted them at the stake, good and evil alike: but more remained intact than ever were unearthed.

"I myself once saw a vault opened up when builders excavated for the foundation of a house, many years ago . . ."

Pierre shuddered.

"It is not so much what I saw as the inferences I was compelled to draw. Now from behind some some brazen gate a Presence commands Diane to enter. Her dead lover calls her to God knows what terrible festival among the dead. Or Something impersonates the dead Marquis, for some purpose beyond imagining, some lingering trace of an ancient force that has come to life and strengthened itself through feeding on her susceptible mind.

"And now please dispense with my company while I study various things. Notably this clipping, and this scrap of a note. Those Par-tagas cigars are at your elbow, and there is a decanter of Armagnac."

So saying, Pierre left me to my own resources.

I PROWLED about his study,

peering at the titles of books ranged row after row on their shelves; scrutinizing the clustered simitars, ripple-edged kreeses, keen tulwars, and the sheaves of lances and assegais standing in a corner. And here and there were *epees*, with their bell guards and slim, three-cornered blades: each a trophy of some encounter of Pierre's younger days, when the duel was not the comic opera affair it is today in 193—.

Raoul entered, presented Pierre's compliments, and left a tray of cold meats, cheese, and a bottle of thin, dry wine. Strange, how a fellow that keeps such excellent brandy would have such terrible sour wine! But it wasn't so bad . . . and neither was Bayonne . . . with a quiet month or so the most of which was to be devoted to acting as Pierre's second in fencing with a dead marquis who declaimed the *Diwan* of Hafiz from his grave in Marrakesh. But I didn't blame the marquis. That girl would make any one turn over in his grave!

And then Pierre reappeared. "I see that you have survived those sandwiches *a l'americain* which Raoul constructed. Good! But I have a task for you.

"Lead on," I replied.

"Alors, my good Raoul will drive you to Mademoiselle Diane's

house, where you will take your post at the door of her bedroom. You will stand watch, and if she walks in her sleep, follow her, even to the fuming hinges of hell's back door, but by no means wake her. And here," he continued, "is a pistol and a clip of cartridges, and a flashlight."

I thrust the Luger into my hip-pocket, tested the flashlight and found it in good order. "It seems," I commented, "that we are not dealing entirely with dead men muttering in their graves."

"From what I learned — possibly I should say, inferred — while you were absorbing the most of that decanter of Armagnac," replied Pierre, "there is something in what you say. In the meanwhile, keep your mind strictly on your work, and do not be too free with that pistol. I will be on hand later to relieve you, and I prefer not to have you riddle me in error."

"Shall we leave the door open?"

"No," answered Pierre, "I have a most accomplished pass key. *A tantot!*"

And Pierre returned to his holy of holies to answer the telephone as I followed Raoul to the Isotta.

"MONSIEUR LANDON," greeted the lovely Livaudais as she admitted me, "you don't know how relieved I am that Monsieur

d'Artois has taken things in hand. But what is he doing this evening?"

"Lord alone knows, beyond busily studying that clipping and that note from the marquis' unknown friend in Morocco. And his telephone rang continually. He's hot on the trail of something, or he wouldn't have sent me to stand guard at your door tonight."

"Good God! Am I then in such danger?"

"By no means. I am here merely to follow you if you wander tonight."

"Splendid. Then I shall bid you goodnight. Surely you'll forgive my being such an anything but gracious hostess? You know, it's been a trying day. There on the table is a decanter of Grenache, and cigarettes."

"Perhaps you might show me the switches that control the lights," I suggested. "I prefer to watch in the dark, but I may need light in a hurry."

After showing me the switch, Mademoiselle Livaudais bade me goodnight. I selected the most uncomfortable chair in the living-room: not such a difficult task, with that array of somber teak, carved by artizans who, since they sat cross-legged on the floor, had no conception of comfort as applied to chairs — and set it near

the bedroom door. Then I took a length of heavy thread I'd brought for that purpose, and tied one end of it to the doorknob and the other to a heavy bronze ashtray which I set on a chair at the other side of the door. Thus if she opened the door, and caught me napping, the fall of the ashtray would arouse me. Not that I expected to doze; but rather that I didn't want to take any chances.

I settled down to watch. It wasn't like military sentry duty, where a moment of drowsiness might cost the lives of an entire outpost. There was nothing to do but sit there in that exquisitely carved teak straitjacket, with my reflections for company.

And I wasn't the least bit drowsy. My mission effectively prevented that. I wondered if the dead marquis materialized and led her to a hidden panel, or called from the street, or tapped on her window-pane. The whole thing was outrageous: so much so that the marquis murmuring in his grave occupied a much smaller place in my thoughts than this exceedingly lovely Diane.

In fact, I began to think with decided disapproval of the marquis; although, to be honest about it, he was handicapped, in a way.

And thus and thus . . .

Then I wondered at the sweet-

ness that subtly pervaded the room. Strange I hadn't noticed it before. Well, those Partagas cigars of Pierre's had been heavy enough to dull my sense of smell for a while. Certainly I'd not notice that delicate perfume. Like the ghost of incense. The very ashes of an odor.

I'm sure I wasn't asleep, and hadn't been even for a moment of that watch. And yet as I look back at it all, I couldn't have been awake.

Something was emerging from the darkness of Diane's living-room. I sat there, contemplating the shadow that materialized from the shadows, as though of all things in the world there was nothing more commonplace than that the blackness should coalesce into a shape.

I regarded with mild curiosity the silvery gleam that deliberately drew closer. I wondered what mummary was in progress. It might of course be a knife. Perhaps I should really shift a bit to one side, or else it would pin me to the back of my chair. It came nearer . . .

Then something within me snapped. I knew that I had been sleeping, with my eyes open and fully conscious. With a terrific start I moved, just in time to evade the stroke.

The intruder instinctively

sought for an instant to wrench his dagger free from the unyielding hardwood which held it fast: so that I had him well by the throat before he abandoned his weapon and met me hand to hand.

He was lean as a serpent and longarmed as an ape. But I eluded his clutch, and drove a fast one to his jaw that sent him reeling back into the darkness. It shook him. It should have laid him out cold. But he came back for more.

As he recovered and closed in, a fresh poniard in hand, I drew my pistol and fired.

I saw him sag in the middle and crumple, riddled by that hail of lead at close range; saw another shape emerge from the darkness at my left. But before I could shift my fire, there was a heavy impact behind my ear: and then I saw nothing at all save abysmal blackness shot with livid streaks and dazzling flashes.

"Where's Pierre?" was my last thought as I met the floor, still clutching the pistol.

I DON'T KNOW how long I was out. My head was spinning crazily as I opened my eyes and saw Pierre regarding me with mingled solicitude and amusement.

"So," he railed, "I leave you on guard and here I find you,

flat on your face. No matter! Your stout skull seems none the worse.

"But what happened to the corpse?" queried d'Artois, as I clambered to my feet and dropped into a chair.

"What corpse?

He indicated the pistol lying on the floor where it had slipped from my fingers when my grip had relaxed, and pointed at the empty cartridge-cases glittering on the rug.

"Someone . . . how would you say it? . . . was polished off. You never miss."

Flattering, but true.

That dark splash that stained the polished hardwood floor at the edge of the rug did indicate some one seriously riddled.

It all came back to me.

"They crept up on me. I was asleep with my eyes open. I came to in the nick of time. And number two slugged me just as I accounted for number one."

I wrenched the poniard from the chair.

"Lucky I snapped out of it," I continued. "Good Lord, but I can't understand how I watched that fellow slip up on me without my moving until it was almost too late. I wonder if it could have been that perfume . . . "

"What perfume?" queried Pierre.

I sniffed, twice, thrice. "Be damned, Pierre, but it's gone. That must have been it."

But d'Artois was looking at the poniard, and had nothing to say about vanished doors. "*Mais regardez donc!* Here! Take the slant!"

He pointed at the inlay in delicate hair-lines of pale gold that decorated the slim, curved blade.

"Very pretty job of inlaying," I admitted. "Never saw a peacock more beautifully drawn."

"*Imbecile!*" fumed Pierre. "So it's only a pretty bit of engraving to you, this peacock! But it's a wonder Mademoiselle Diane hasn't been disturbed with all the rioting and shooting. Could she have walked out before our very eyes?"

"No. Look at that string knotted to the doorknob and the ashtray. It's not been disturbed. She's still asleep."

"Nevertheless, I must look." Pierre opened the door. "Death and damnation! She's gone!" he exclaimed. "Walked right out before your eyes!"

Gone she was. Not through the door I had watched. And not through the windows, between whose bars nothing larger than a cat could have crept."

"No, and not up the chimney," announced Pierre. "Then where?"

"Through the floor or the wall, perhaps," I hinted.

D'ARTOIS TOOK ME at my word. On hands and knees he explored the floor and the tiled hearth, poking and thrusting about with the blade of his penknife, seeking for some trace of a catch or spring which would release a trapdoor or sliding panel. And then he devoted his attention to the paneled walls; but in vain. If there was any secret exit, secret indeed it was.

But Pierre was by no means discouraged. "Let this rest for the moment," he directed, "and we will search the rest of the apartment."

"But," I protested, "that isn't finding Diane."

"Finding Diane," he replied, "may not be the most important thing at present. She has been carrying on her nocturnal wanderings for some time, and from each trip she has returned. It is likely that she will return this time also."

"How about trailing those assassins that nearly polished me off?"

"Eminently sensible," admitted d'Artois. "If we could follow them the trail would doubtless lead to the source of the deviltry. Your letting moonlight through one of them must have been most disconcerting."

Look! They left through the door, and none too deliberately."

"But this will have to be investigated by daylight," he continued. "And that would advertise our moves to the enemy. Finally, I suspect that the trail would be lost very soon after it is picked up in the street. Let us rather inspect this house of the dead marquis."

And while Pierre did the serious inspecting, I prowled about, admiring the antique Feraghan carpet that shimmered silkily under my feet, the floor lamp of saw-pierced damascene brasswork, the oddly carved teak statuettes from Tibet, curious bits of jade and lacquer: and on the mantel was a silver peacock with outspread fan.

"Look!" exclaimed Pierre, interrupting my contemplation of the rare and strange adornments of the room. "Behold! Unusual, *n'est-ce pas?*"

I TOOK THE book he offered me, thumbed its pages. "What's so unusual about that? Looks like Arabic or Persian . . . God God, Pierre, it's bound . . . damned if it isn't! Human skin!"

"I saw that also. But I referred to the title."

"But that's the back cover."

"*Que voulez-vous?* Where would you have it in such language? But look at the title itself."

"You forget that I can't *read* this scratching," I reminded Pierre. "Try it yourself."

"*Pardon!* Well then, it is entitled, *Kitab ul Aswad.*"

"Of course. The Black Book. Manifestly appropriate. Title matches the color of the cover. Now this one," I continued, indicating a red-bound American best seller, "should be called *Kitab ul Abbmar.*"

"Idiot!" growled Pierre. "Have you ever heard of *THE* Black Book?"

And to forestall any further irrelevant replies, Pierre opened the book and read aloud in sonorous Arabic:

"Which is to say," he translated, knowing that the old, literary Arabic is too much for any but a scholar, "*God created of fire seven bright spirits, even as a man lights seven tapers one after the other: and the chief of these was Malik Tawus, to whom he gave the dominion of the world and all that therein is: so that God sleeps dreamlessly while his viceroy rules as seemeth good to him.*"

"Odd enough," I admitted, "but what of it? Except that the evening is superabundant with peacocks. First they try to ream me out with a blade inlaid with a peacock; and then I stand here, admiring the silver image of a peacock on the

mantel, and now you read me of Malik Tawus. Say, now, was that *malik* or *malaak*?"

"*Malik*," replied Pierre. "Although he has been called *Malaak* as well."

"And you end," I resumed, "by favoring me with a rich passage about the King, Lord, or Angel Peacock, according as the scribe splashed his reed or the tradition garbled the story . . ."

"I heard something in her room," Pierre interrupted. And Pierre, who had preceded me, halted and whirled to face me at Diane's door. "She has returned. While we babbled of black books."

"Impossible!"

"Then take a look," challenged Pierre.

I looked, and I saw.

Diane lay curled up in her great canopied bed, sound asleep. On her feet were satin boudoir slippers, torn and scarred and soiled.

"She went, and she returned, before our eyes."

And then Diane spoke: but not to us.

"I found the spring, Etienne. But I couldn't move the panel. I'll return tomorrow night . . ."

"Good Lord, it's got her!"

"Don't wake her," commanded Pierre. "Let her sleep. We've been outmaneuvered. *Alors*, we will retire in confusion, get ourselves

some sleep, and tomorrow—we shall see what we shall see."

AFTER A LATER breakfast, Pierre and I drove across the river to the Third Guard's Cemetery, turned back to town and then through the Mousserole Gate, across the drawbridge, and into the hills. D'Artois apparently was idling away his time; but having seen him open and smoke his way through the second pack of Bastos, which smelled no less of burning rags than the first pack, I knew that he was far from loafing. Whenever we passed the obsolete gun emplacements, casemates, or lunettes in the surrounding hills, Pierre would slow up, stare a moment, refer to a sketch, mutter to himself, and step on the gas again.

"Vauban built that . . . and that also was erected by Vauban . . ." was the sum of his comments.

We were retracing our course. The jovial, bearded and mitered statue of Cardinal Lavigerie welcomed us to Place de Theatre.

"Doubtless we should pause for a drink."

"The *anis del oso* is not so bad," I seconded.

But in vain.

Pierre drew away from the curb, and thence to the left, skirting the park that lies outside the walls and moat on the side toward the Biar-

ritz road. Again to the left, turning our backs to Biarritz, we headed into Porte d'Espagne and the old guard house, driving across the causeway that at this point blocks the moat.

"Vauban, it seems, built the whole works," I remarked. And then, "Hello! What's this? Stop a moment . . ."

But d'Artois cleared the breach in the wall, utterly ignoring my desire to pause and look.

And then he spoke: "Jackass! Do you fancy that I didn't see those several men roaming about the green between the edge of the moat and the Spring of St. Leon with surveyor's instruments and the like? And need I impress upon you that they are by no means surveying, and that those instruments are by no means transits and levels? *Alors*, why need we pause and stare at those good men?"

All of which suggested that Pierre knew more about the goings on at the Spring of St. Leon than he cared to publish in the papers.

"Well, perhaps Vauban didn't build the whole works," I began, seeing that surveyors had been definitely dismissed. "I would imagine that we'd find the entrance somewhere near the ancient part of the city, not far from the

cathedral. Possibly near that fountain . . ."

"Erected on the site of the castle of the Hastingues, taken by assault in the Eleventh Century by the Bayonnais," quoted Pierre mockingly from the guide book.

I ignored the jibe, and continued, "And to find it, we'll have to cover the ground stone by stone."

But Pierre was taking no hints that afternoon. "Impossible!" he exclaimed. "It would take weeks. And then we'd be too late."

"Very much what I say, *mon vieux*. In a word . . ."

Pierre's gesture was painfully expressive.

"Well," said I, "The whole thing sounds like a Chinese dream. All of it."

Un rêve chinois, do you say? Comment? Was it a Mongolian vision that came so close to pinning you to the back of your chair after you, an old campaigner, went to sleep with your eyes open an hour after taking your post? An Asiatic dream that you shot to ribbons when you awoke from your unaccountable sleep? We must work fast. And this time there shall be no jugglery of taking her away and returning her under our very eyes."

"What do you propose?"

"We will both stand watch in her room."

"After what happened last night," I objected, "They may get both of us with some devil's trick. Like that whiff of perfume."

"I have considered that," replied d'Artois. "And we will see. There was never a peacock hatched who can twice in the same way outwit Pierre d'Artois. Nor is it likely that the enemy would repeat that same device. They have too many tricks."

RAOUL admitted us. "*Monsieur*," he began, "a visitor is waiting for you in the study."

"*Magnifique!* And is she handsome?"

"*Mais, monsieur*, he is a foreign dignitary. An emir."

"Then offer him a drink, and assure him that in but one moment I will have the honor of greeting him."

In Pierre's study we found the guest, a lean, wiry fellow with a predatory nose and the keen eye of a bird of prey. A broad, seamed scar ran from his right eye to the point of his chin; and another stretched diagonally across his forehead. Strangely familiar mustaches fringed his lip. And then I remembered that during the past few days I had fancied seeing foreign faces in Bayonne, where

scarcely any face is foreign. Yet those were lean and swarthy in a different manner, and were set off with mustaches whose droop and cut were decidedly outlandish. And just this afternoon I intercepted a glance that was too casual to be convincingly casual.

There was nothing after all remarkably strange about those fellows. Only—well, they didn't wear coat and trousers with the manner of those born to our stupid costume.

"Your servant," began our visitor after a pause that was just long enough to be as impressive as his bow, "doubtless announced me as Nureddin Zenghi, an emir from Kurdistan."

He glanced sharply about him, stared at me for a moment, and found my presence acceptable: all this while d'Artois returned the emir's bow with one of equal profundity and rigidity.

"But in all fairness," he continued, picking his words with just the suggestion of an effort, "I must confess that I am somewhat more than an emir. The fact of it is that I am . . ."

He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "I am the Keeper of the Sanctuary."

"Ah . . . *Monseigneur le . . .*" D'Artols paused to select a suitable

title. Propriety above all else, was Pierre.

"Emir, if you must be formal, Monsieur d'Artois. Although I am incognito. Extremely so, in fact."

"*A votre service, monsieur l'emir,*" acknowledged Pierre, and again bowed in his inimitable fashion, which I endeavored to duplicate as he presented me.

It is difficult to bow elegantly while seeking to keep a couple of fingers near the butt of a pistol in one's hip pocket.

"As I said," resumed our visitor, "I am Keeper of the Sanctuary at Djeb el Ahmar, in Kurdistan, the center of the *Faith*. Viceroy, so to speak, of Malik Tawus."

Peacocks, I thought, were becoming monotonous. I thought of that dagger I had barely escaped last night, and that book in Diane's parlor.

"Moreover," continued the emir, "I am a friend of France."

The emir was impressive, but not excessively coherent, I thought. But Pierre was equal to waiting without committing himself.

"All of which I appreciate and respect. But pray continue, my Lord Keeper."

I wondered just what ax the emir wished to grind on the friendliness to France.

"Therefore," continued the emir,

"I am here to seek your aid in doing France a signal service, and at the same time overthrow a malignant impostor."

"A pretender, I fancy, to the custody of the Sanctuary?" suggested Pierre, fencing like the master swordsman that he was, with word and steel alike.

"Precisely. And it will be very much to your interest to help me, Monsieur d'Artois. Indeed, the welfare of your *protegee*, Mademoiselle Diane Livaudais, is closely linked with my own success."

PIERRE ESSAYED a feint. "You mean, *monseigneur*, that you will lead me to the hidden vault where Mademoiselle Diane spends her nights seeking to enter the presence that asks her to open his grave?"

The emir's brows rose in sacerdotic arches. "That is interesting, of course, but most obscure," evaded the emir. "In fact, I am by no means certain that I understand what you have in mind."

"But," continued the emir, "this is what I have in mind: Abdul Malaak, who came from Kurdistan three years ago to seize the local sanctuary—yes, as you surely have learned from the events of the past few days, the servants of Malik Tawus gather in conclave here in Bayonne—Abdul

Malaak has succeeded in using his occult science to gain control of the mind and will of your *protegee*, Mademoiselle Livaudais. And when his control is complete, he will use her as an outside agent to operate in his cause in France, as a spy, unearthing information from various prominent persons he will designate. She will to all intents and purposes be a charming, gifted woman, acceptable and accepted in the best circles; but in fact she will be no more than an automaton, her every thought and word dictated by Abdul Malaak, who sits in a *solitarium* behind the throne in the hall where the conclave meets."

"Ah . . . indeed . . . most interesting, monsieur l'*emir*," replied d'Artois. "And is it presumptuous to inquire as to the nature of Abdul Malaak's plans?"

"By no means," assured the emir. "I am a friend of France.

There was a stone. Now for the ax he wished to grind thereon.

"Abdul Malaak has assembled a circle of adepts in occult science," explained the emir. "Some from Hindustan. Others from Tibet and High Asia. Many from Kurdistan and Armenia, and Azerbaijan, the land of fire. And each a master in the science of fundamental vibration.

"To give you a crude example

—though to a mind like yours, an example is scarcely needed—a company of troops on foot marching in cadence can wreck a bridge. The note of a violin string which is attuned to the fundamental vibration of a goblet will cause the goblet to shiver to fragments."

"Precisely," agreed d'Artois.

"And going from the physical to the mental, let one man in a theater rise and shout Fire! there will be a panic.

"Thus these adepts will concentrate in unison on whatever thought they wish to project: so that through the principle of resonance they will uncork the vast reservoir of hidden discontent with society, religion, and politics that exists in France as in every country, and in the end effect the overthrow of established rule."

"As in Russia," I interposed.

"Exactly," assented the emir. "You also are a person of rare comprehension. And, to bring us up to date, I was not amazed at what happened in Spain not long ago to the Bourbons. And being a friend of France, I am here to seek your aid in thwarting this powerful engine of destruction. Single-handed, I would be hopelessly outnumbered, for while I have friends in the circle, they have been corrupted by Abdul Malaak and turned against me."

"Very well, monsieur l'emir, I am with you, heart and soul. But tell me, is it true that the Marquis de la Tour de Maracq is dead?"

"Who says that he is dead?" countered the emir.

"It has been written," replied Pierre.

"What is written may be history, or prophecy. Who can say?"

Score one for the emir. He didn't know whether Pierre was for or against the marquis. He was sure of Pierre's interest in Diane, and in friends of France.

"May I ask—and I trust again that I do not presume," said Pierre,—"why it is that you are so anxious to thwart Abdul Mallak's plans? I mean, you comprehend, aside from your friendship for France."

"That is simple. Our cult is divided by a schism. There are those who seek temporal power, and those who care only for peaceful spreading of the cult of Malik Tawus, the Lord of the World. We believe that He has no need of or desire for political machinations in His behalf, and that in due course, the Lord of the Painted Fan will Himself assume the throne of the world, and exalt those who believe in Him—just as your early Christians said of the Nazarene."

"Now be pleased to give me a

pencil and paper. I will make you a sketch."

The emir hitched his chair up to Pierre's desk.

This was a bit too good to be true. I remembered that saying about Greeks bearing gifts. The events of the past two days had likewise made me wary of altruistic Kurds. I loosened my pistol.

D'Artois caught the move from the side of his eye, and shrugged negligently.

"Start at Porte d'Espagne," began the emir, as he traced a line. "Then . . ."

BUT HE spoke no further. Something flickered through the open window the emir faced. He pitched forward, clawing at his chest. I drew and fired, then leaped to the window, and fired again, not with any hope of hitting the figure that was disappearing around the first turn of the alley just as I pressed the trigger, but at least to give him my blessing.

"Give me a hand," said D'Artois.

The hilt of a dagger projected from the emir's chest. He shuddered, coughed blood which joined the stain on his shirtfront.

"Porte d'Espagne . . . to the left . . . great peril . . . take . . . many . . . armed . . . men . . ."

He clutched the hilt of the

dagger, tore open the front of his shirt, and with a final effort, snatched from about his throat a thin golden chain from which depended a tiny amulet: a silver peacock with tail fanned out and jewelled with emeralds.

Neither d'Artois nor I could understand the utterance that was cut off by another gush of blood.

"*Tout fini!*" exclaimed Pierre. "He offered us this when he knew he couldn't give us even another scrap of information. This glittering fowl must be a token of admittance."

"Draw the shades!" commanded d'Artois. "And get away from that window. Likewise, stand guard until I return. On your life, admit no one. Not any one."

"The police?" I suggested. "I fired two shots."

"I will handle the police. No one must know that the Keeper of the Sanctuary is dead. As long as they are in doubt, we have a weapon against them: for they thought him important enough to kill him before he could tell his story."

As d'Artois dashed out, I barred the door after him.

I COULD HARDLY share Pierre's optimism about the police. Here we had a stranger in the house, neatly harpooned with a

knife. And what a story we'd have to tell! Someone tossed a dagger through the open window just as the Keeper of the Sanctuary was to explain where Diane wandered every night to claw at the door of a vault whose occupant commanded her to open his grave. Even an American jury would choke at a tale like that!

I picked up one of the drab little things which in France pass as magazines, and came across an article on the prevalence of murder in the United States.

"This is good," I reflected. "Now here in law-abiding Bayonne, I sit peacefully at the door of a lady's bedroom, and some one tries to dissect me with a nicely decorated dagger. The next day, a visitor has his conversation punctuated by a knife thrown through the window by parties unknown . . ."

I shifted a bit more out of range of the window, and checked up on the cartridges in the Luger.

"To crown it, I'll get buck fever and let daylight through Raoul or Pierre when they enter. Or maybe they'll find me here, deftly disembowelled and marked, 'opened by mistake.'

*"Open my grave and see the smoke
that curls about thy feet! . . ."*

I was developing a marked dislike for Hafiz. That old Persian was distinctly macabre. Then this one:

"If the scent of her hair were to blow over the place where I had lain dead an hundred years, my bones would come dancing forth from their grave . . . "

Then I wondered how Diane's phantom lover tied into the psychic-vibration scheme of turning France upside down. Now that I'd mulled over the felonious assaults and successful assassination, I couldn't help but have several thoughts concerning this exceptionally lovely Diane.

The click-clack of the knocker startled me. "*Auf vive?*" I demanded.

"It is I, Pierre" came the reply.

"Enter with your hands in the air."

But I recognized the voice, and returned my pistol.

"*Eh bien*, she is fixed. *Monsieur le Prefet* was reasonable."

Do you mean that he swallowed that wild tale?"

"*Mais, certainement*. Though there was of course some talk of what in your charming country one calls a lunacy commission; but in the end I prevailed."

THAT EVENING Pierre and I called on the lovely Livaudais.

"*Mademoiselle*," began Pierre after acknowledging Diane's greeting, "you eluded us last night. But this time we will be more vigilant."

D'Artois deposited a large and very heavy suitcase on the floor.

"Oh, but you must be planning an extended visit, with all that luggage!" laughed Diane.

"And why not? Monsieur Landon and I keeping you under surveillance all the way around the clock, *n'est-ce pas?* But tell me, did we disturb you last night? Am I forgiven . . . "

"And so it was you that broke my cutglass decanter and spilled wine all over the rug. But no, I didn't hear a sound."

"'Tis well!" exclaimed Pierre. "I would have been desolate had we awakened you. And I shall send you a new decanter, all filled with my own Oporto."

"Monsieur d'Artois, you're a darling. But how in the world am I to sleep tonight, with the both of you standing guard, staring at me as though I were a dodo come to life?"

"Simple enough. Take a bit of this sedative. It won't drug you so that you won't hear the voice."

"Well, why not give her a heavy shot of it," I suggested, "so that she won't hear the voice at all, and

leave that devil behind his sepulcher door chanting in vain."

"Not at all!" objected Pierre. "She must find the way to open the door, and pass through and fulfil that which has been impressed upon her subconscious mind. Then, after she has done that, we shall land like a ton of those bricks. I, Pierre d'Artois, will land in person; and henceforth, *Mademoiselle* will see no tombs by night."

Then, to Diane: "It is now passably late. Suppose that when you have arrayed yourself in...should I most appropriately say, walking-costume?...take a bit of this sedative. And then we will stand guard, we two."

As the door of Diane's bedroom closed, I turned to d'Artois. "Why that suitcase? It's heavy as a locomotive."

"That you will understand before the evening is over. I have there various things which I may need on a moment's notice: though I can not say at what moment.

"We are fighting an organization that has infiltrated its members into every stratum of society. And by this time you have no doubt that you and I are marked and sentenced on account of our association with Diane.

"We are not only contending with enemies skilled in armed encounter, but equally gifted in

psychic conflicts. Witness, for example, how this so lovely Mademoiselle Diane..."

"Taking my name in vain again?"

Diane opened the door and revealed herself in a negligee of blue silk curiously shot with gold. I wondered that Etienne hadn't bequeathed her his chateau as well as his house in Bayonne.

"But I assure you it was complimentary," replied Pierre. "And here is your potion."

She accepted the glass, sampled its contents, drained it, stood there, the smile slowly fading from her features. Then she shuddered. "These engagements with the dead...I'm so glad I won't be alone tonight...Goodnight, *Messieurs!*"

Vainly enough, we wished her a goodnight also, this incredible girl who could still, at times, smile.

Then d'Artois took from his suitcase a coil of flexible insulated wire, very much like the extension cord they use to increase the range of a vacuum cleaner. In addition to the lamp and reflector at one end, there was a small portable snap-switch, and a tiny globe scarcely larger than those used as Christmas tree decorations. This layout Pierre plugged in at a baseboard outlet, a convenience which is most unusual in Bayonne.

AS PIERRE uncoiled the wire and pulled it along the wall, I glanced again at the chair I had occupied the night before. Diane had accepted Pierre's myth about the shattered decanter, and hadn't noticed the scar in the back of the chair. But that one look was enough to bring out a sweat on me.

Then I thought of the hurled knife which had cut short the remarks of Nurreddin.

"*Mademoiselle from Bar le Duc, parlez vous . . .*" I hummed as I fidgeted about.

"*Tais-toi, imbecile!*" snapped d'Artois. "Bawdy to the last."

Which of course was unjust in the extreme, as I'd spent hours trying to teach Pierre the rendition of that classic.

"Surely, she is asleep by now," he continued. "And like you, I likewise would whistle to keep up my courage. But give me your pistol," said d'Artois.

"How come?" I demanded as quietly as I could at that outrageous order.

"You are no less on edge than I am. And you shoot damnable straight. If by mistake you pointed that siege gun at me or Diane, you would have long regrets. And anyway, we want no disturbance or shooting. The enemy can't see us, though they must know we are

here; and they must not hear us."

I surrendered the pistol. Pierre was right, of course, but with the start I made last night, I had begun to take an interest in that excellent gun.

"Eh bien, let us take our posts," directed Pierre.

I followed him into Diane's room, where he set up the reflector and lamp in a corner so that if the circuit were completed, the entire room would be illuminated.

"Take that chair and draw it up. Thus. Now mark well the position of mine."

Pierre stood at the wall switch.

"Should you catch a glimpse of a very faint bluish light, don't dive for it. It's just the pilot light of this lamp I've set up in the corner. As long as it glows, I'll know that the . . . what do you call her? . . . the juice is on, and that I can depend on light when I need it.

"Ready? Good!"

The wall switch clicked us into darkness. The sinister watch was on.

SITTING IN A lady's bedroom in Bayonne does not sound so terrifying. But when the lady is awaiting summons from the dead, and when the dead sends living envoys with keen knives, it is yet again something else.

I wondered whether I'd fall asleep with my eyes open, and whether d'Artois could resist that damnable influence, whatever it had been.

Have you ever been in Morocco and heard the drums thump-thumping in the hills, calling the tribesmen to revolt? My heart was giving a perfect imitation.

Diane's breathing was soft and quiet and normal.

Silence from Pierre's post. Once in a while I caught a passing glance of the bluish-green pilot light, as he noiselessly shifted in his chair. Lucky he told me about that light! And once I heard him draw a deep breath. Just a deep breath. But infinitely expressive!

It was getting d'Artois too. Not a comforting thought.

The clock in the cathedral chimed twelve. And then the quarter, ages later. Then the tension eased. It is born in us to place all diablerie at midnight: and that having passed uneventfully, I felt that nothing would happen until tomorrow night, when I'd be in a much better frame of mind. Thoughts would be so much more collected . . .

My relief was premature.

I felt rather than heard a vibration pulsing through the room. It was as though I watched some one beating a kettle-drum at great dis-

tance, getting the rhythm by seeing the drummer's body sway to the cadence instead of actually hearing it.

Then, finally, the pitch increased into the lower limits of audible vibration. I could hear it. Tum-tumpa-tumtum-tumpa-tum . . . low and massive thudding from across the wastes of space. The drumming of Abaddon of the Black Hands.

It filled the room. It was an earthquake set to a cadence.

I heard a soft, sulfurous cursing from Pierre's side of the room.

Then a hand on my shoulder.

"It is I. The pilot light is out. They have cut the house wires. We are watched. *And there will be someone sent for us.*"

The drumming was reaching a more resonant pitch, so that the walls of the room amplified it.

Diane stirred in her bed. The voice was calling her to the hidden tomb.

"When I am dead, open my grave and see . . ."

I could almost hear that sweet, rich Persian verse as an overtone of that sonorous drumming.

"They are here!" whispered d'Artois. "I can feel them."

"And we're in the dark."

"Here, take this flashlight."

illustration by
T. Wyatt Nelson



Pierre thrust it into my hand.
"Quick, toward the window!"

The circle of light revealed a white-robed intruder armed with a drawn simitar.

"Shoot him!" I whispered to Pierre.

"No. Hold the light! And stand clear!"

THE INTRUDER stared full and unblinking into the brilliant flashlight. His eyes were sightless and staring. He advanced with the fluent, slinking motion of a panther, straight toward us.

Then it all happened in an instant.

D'Artois with his chair parried

the sweeping cut of his adversary's simitar, and as he parried, he sank, squatting on his left heel and simultaneously kicking upward with his right foot.

Perfect, and deadly.

The enemy dropped in his tracks. His blade fell ringing to the floor, and in a flash d'Artois had the simitar.

"Keep the light on the window!" cried Pierre.

The companion of the first invader dropped fully into the circle of light. After him came a second. Both were robed like the first, and armed with simitars. And both stared sightlessly; yet as certainly as though they saw, they poised themselves like great cats, gathered for the final leap to overwhelm us.

Great God! Noise or no noise, why didn't d'Artois fire?

"Use your gun!" I croaked, trying to yell and whisper at the same time.

Facing those blades, empty-handed . . .

Christ! Was Pierre asleep with his eyes open, as I had been the night before?

Then a glittering streak from the darkness at my side, and the first one dropped, shorn half asunder by Pierre's simitar stroke.

"Two!" grunted d'Artois, and drew back on his guard for an

instant, just out of the beam of the light.

But before he could advance, the third leaped forward, covered in his charge by a circle of flaming, hissing steel . . .

Clack-clack-clack!

Pierre was parrying that blind assault, cut for cut. Parrying a desperate, reckless whirlwind of steel, stroke after stroke.

Then he slipped through the mill, and sank forward in a lunge.

I saw Pierre's blade projecting a foot beyond his opponent's back. The enemy was too close to use his simitar. I picked up a blade and struck his weapon from his grasp, lest he maul Pierre to a pulp with it, since he couldn't slice him to pieces.

But that didn't stop him. He gripped Pierre's shoulder and drew himself forward, pulling Pierre's blade still further through his own body in order to close in.

I hacked again and again, in a frenzy lest that madman tear d'Artois to pieces with his bare hands.

"Tenez!" gasped d'Artois.
"C'est fini."

He disentangled himself from the slashed, hacked body. As a surgeon or butcher, I'd never qualify, the way I mangle things when I hurry.

"Quick! That first one . . ."

D'Artois snatched the red blade from my hand, and with a single stroke decapitated the one who was rising to his knees and groping for his blade.

"Look!" exclaimed Pierre.

Diane, sitting on the edge of her bed, was slipping her feet into a pair of satin mules. It had seemed several lifetimes to me, from the time that d'Artois had advanced, armed with a chair, against the first intruder, until he had finished the third; but so swiftly had he worked that Diane had scarcely time to get out of bed, and find and don her robe and slippers.

"She's on the way."

"But where?"

"Idiot! She will leave the same way our three visitors entered. Look!"

WE FOLLOWED Diane with the beam of the flashlight.

She went straight toward the window, grasped the bars, and pulled herself to the sill.

"Follow her!" commanded Pierre. "Strip this one—his robe isn't bloody."

I stripped the one cleanly decapitated.

Those fellows didn't drop from the ceiling, but came down a shaft through the wall, whose opening was concealed by the window-casing.

"How about a turban?"

"This one will do. Wind it with the stained end in. Quick, now! Follow her. Put that damned turban on as you go. *Allez!*"

Diane had pulled herself up. A glimpse of her heels, and she was out of sight.

"Now my pistol."

"Take it. But hurry. I'll be busy here . . ."

"What?"

"*Va-t-en!*" commanded Pierre. "Have I ever failed? Go!"

I leaped to the window-sill, felt, and found a void over my head, grasped the edge, and pulled myself up. In spite of our knowledge of the thick walls of these old houses, the existence of such a shaft would never have been suspected. The flashlight revealed a narrow passage not over ten feet long. At its end was a shaft leading down. I ventured a flash down its depth, and saw a ladder leading to a level that was well below the first floor of the house. At the bottom I turned, and faced a low archway which opened into a passage leading straight ahead.

Some twenty paces ahead of me was Diane. I slopped along as fast as I could in the loose red slippers of the enemy, and as I advanced, I wound my turban as well as I could on the march.

Diane was walking, with a slow, almost mechanical stride, or she would have been quite out of sight. As it was, I quickly overtook her, and then snapped out the flash-light. Diane, deep in her trance, was utterly unaware of my seizing her robe so that she could guide me through the darkness.

She was stepping to the cadence of those drums.

I could distinguish now that the sound was of many drums: the roll and purr and sputter of tiny tom-toms against a background of solemn booming that made the masonry quiver beneath my feet. Yet the source of the sound was still far away.

Although the incline was not steep, it was perceptibly downgrade. We were turning ever so slowly to the left. The air was becoming damp and musty and cool. Our descent must now be taking us far beneath the uttermost foundations of Bayonne. Somewhere, below and to the left, was the brazen door that guarded the one who chanted in Persian and invited Diane to a conclave of the dead that were lonely in their deep vaults.

Ahead of us was a faint glow. I halted to let Diane gain a few paces, and then, hugging the left wall so as to gain the maximum protection from the door-jamb in

case there should be a reception committee waiting, I crept forward as silently as possible.

Then it occurred to me that unseeing automatons like those that Pierre had stopped only by hacking them to pieces would hardly be susceptible to surprise. And if more swordsmen, bound in a deep trance and directed by some master mind to overwhelm me, were waiting, I'd have my hands full. I wondered if a pistol would stop them . . . the Moro *jurmentados* down in Sulu, riddled with dum-dum bullets, continue their charge until they hack to fragments the enemy who hoped to stop them with rifle fire.

Well, at least those three swordsmen had been *alive*, and their blood was like any other blood when spilled.

I VENTURED a peep around the doorjamb. The passage opened into a small alcove which was illuminated by the red flames of a pair of tall black candles set one at each side of a brazen door. Diane was alone before the door.

She hesitated, half swaying on her feet for a moment, then knelt on the second of the three steps that led to the door. Where her fingers traced the arabesques and scrolls embossed on the bronze, the verdigris had been worn away.

How many hours had she spent in wearing the seasoned bronze to its original color? Or were there then others who sought the same doorway? And if there were, when might they appear?

Evidently she was seeking the hidden catch which would open the door; the gateway of the tomb.

Surely Diane needed no light to further her quest. Then why these lurid candles? Had they a ritualistic significance, or were they for sentries, or acolytes that served the Presence behind the panel? I knew not what cross-passages I had unknowingly passed in the dark, and what swordsmen might be marching from any of them. Swordsmen, or worse . . .

Then Diane spoke; not to me, but to the dead behind the door. "I'm trying, Etienne, but I can't find the spring."

She rose from her task and retreated, turning away. Her eyes stared sightlessly at me. Then she wavered, tottered, and retraced her steps. Some compelling power was forcing her to resume her task.

I followed her, and looking over her shoulder, studied the embossing her fingers traced. Each curve, each figure, each floral and foliate form that could conceal the hidden catch she tapped, fingered, dug with her nails: but there was one she did not touch. And that one of all others

seemed the only one that could control the lock: the center of a lotus blossom, close to the left edge. Even in that dim red light I could clearly distinguish a line of demarcation that separated the substance of the lotus center from the surrounding metal. Then why didn't Diane press it? Why had she avoided it, night after night?

But had she avoided it?

It was smooth and polished. Someone had fingered and touched it.

Diane herself. It all came to me: door would not open until the Presence was ready for her arrival.

I watched her fingers working their way back and forth over the traceries of bronze, toward the center of the lotus blossom. She was touching it . . .

I took a hitch in my belt, slid the simitar and its scabbard back toward my hip, shifted the Luger.

Click!

The door yielded, swinging inward on silent hinges. The drums boomed and roared and thundered. Their vibrations smote me in the face like the blast of a typhoon. An overwhelming perfume surged forth, stifling me with its heavy sweetness.

I leaped in ahead of Diane, advanced a pace toward the blank wall before me then wheeled to my

right, and saw him who made a madness of Diane's nights.

HE SAT cross-legged on a pedestal of carven stone. His arms were crossed on his breast. He was nude, save for a yellow loin-cloth that flamed like golden fire in the purple light of the vault. His face was emaciated and his ribs were hideously prominent. If he breathed, it was not deeply enough to be perceptible.

The drumming thunder ceased abruptly: and the silence was more terrific than the savage roaring pulse that had halted.

Dead?

Dead, save for those fixed, glittering eyes that stared through and past me. But they lived, fiercely, with a smoldering, piercing intentness.

Then someone stepped in between me and the Presence.

Diane had followed me, and standing in front of me, faced him.

Like him, she crossed her arms on her breast. Then she advanced with slow steps, not halting until within a few paces of the Presence. She knelt on the tiles, and bowed. Then she spoke in the expressionless voice of one who recites by rote a speech in a foreign language he does not understand.

"Etienne, I am here. I heard you from across the Border, and

I have obeyed. I have opened your grave."

I stood there like a wooden image, neither drawing my simitar to cleave that living mummy asunder, nor my pistol to riddle him to ribbons. This couldn't be the Marquis de la Tour de Maracq; not this blasphemy from somewhere in High Asia, that might have followed the Golden Horde, ages ago. Yet she had called him Etienne. Then he spoke:

"Landon, it is not good that you have meddled and entered the *solitarium* behind the throne. Even the elect dare not enter here. But since you are here . . ."

He smiled a slow, sinister smile. His long lean arm extended like the undulant advance of a serpent. "Look!"

I followed his compelling gesture with my eyes, and saw the brazen door swing slowly shut. It closed with a click of ominous finality.

I stared for a moment too long, held by the voice and the gesture. Just a moment too long. There was someone behind me. But before I could move, strong hands gripped my arms.

The Presence murmured a command. My simitar and pistol and flashlight were taken from me. The hands released me: and all with such incredible swiftness that I turn-

ed just in time to see my four momentary captors filing into an exit that pierced the wall, carrying with them my blade and pistol. As the last one cleared the threshold, a panel slid silently into place.

I had been a splendid guardian of the lovely girl who knelt at the feet of that creature on the throne!

"That door," resumed the Presence, speaking so deliberately that the moment of my disarming was scarcely an interruption, "is easily opened from the *outside*, by those we wish to admit."

Again he smiled that slow, curved smile of menace.

He looked down at Diane, and spoke to her in purring syllables. She rose from the tiles, and stood there, vacantly regarding us, Diane's body devoid of Diane's spirit.

"This girl and I," said the Presence, "have a few things to discuss. You will therefore be pleased to excuse us . . ."

He inclined his head, and smiled his reptilian smile.

I saw his fingers caress the carvings near the top of the pedestal on which he sat. I leaped, but too late. The floor opened beneath me. As I dropped into the abyss-myl blacknesses below, I caught a glimpse of the purple light above being cut off by the trap-door lifting back into place.

I LANDED on my feet with force enough to give me fallen arches, and pitched forward on my face. The stones were cold and damp and slippery. I rose to my hands and knees, and crept cautiously along, feeling for openings in the floor, and hoping to locate a wall which I could follow to anywhere at all. A corner, or an angle, anywhere to get out of the heavy blackness and near something that would give me a sense of direction. Here there was only up and down, and neither north, south, east, nor west.

Caged in the subcellar of this subterranean vault; locked in the basement of hell's private office. And Diane in the hands of that animated mummy!

Finally I butted head-first into a wall. The stars unfortunately weren't of sufficient duration to let me see where I was. So I crept along, following the cold, moist stones.

My fingers touched a vertical bar: one member of a grillework which blocked my advance. I reached forward with my other hand and grasped another bar, felt my way along, right and left. It was a gate, hinged to the masonry at one side, and chained shut at the other.

Something tangible at last. Something to grip and struggle

with. The gate yielded protestingly for a few inches until the chain drew taut. I could feel the heavy scale of rust and corrosion on the links. I tugged and pulled and pushed, but in vain.

Then I removed my borrowed robe, folded it into a compact pad which I applied to my shoulder. I backed off, carefully measuring my retreat, gathered myself, and with a running leap, charged the gate. The chain snapped. The gate opened. I pitched headlong ahead of me, amid a clatter of links and the clang of the gate's crashing against the wall.

Before I could regain my feet, someone landed on me.

CLEAN, MANLY fighting may have its place in the prize ring, and possibly even the wrestling arena; but in hell's basement it is a needless grace. I shifted just in time to avoid the unknown's knee fouling me. Not to be outdone in courtesy, I closed in, and located his eyes, but before I could apply my thumbs to the best advantage, he broke my attack. Finally I backheeled him, and we both crashed to the paving. Luckily, he absorbed the shock, but it didn't stop him. He lacked the simian strength and terrible arms of the assassin of the night

before, but he made up for it in agility and devastating rage. We both were approaching exhaustion from the fury of attack, defense, and counter-attack.

I yielded suddenly, to throw him off his balance; but I tripped on the loose piece of chain, lost my own balance, and failed to nail him as he pitched forward.

And I couldn't locate him. My own heavy breathing kept me from hearing him. I was trembling violently, and my mouth was dry as cotton. And if my heart pounded any more heavily, I'd burst wide open. Well, he must be in the same shape. So I sank to the floor, hoping to catch him with a low tackle, or to thwart him in a similar maneuver on his part.

But I couldn't find him.

"Come here, damn your hide! I frothed, finally getting enough breath to relieve my wrath.

"Thank God, a Christian! panted a voice not far from me. "And by your speech, an American. Let us be allies, what is left of us.

"And who might you be? I demanded.

"A prisoner like yourself. Let's declare a truce, and if we must fight, follow me to where there is enough light."

The fellow sounded convincing enough. His English was the me-

ticulously correct speech of an educated foreigner.

"Done. Lead on."

"Then put your hand on my shoulder, and I will lead the way," he continued. "To show my good faith, I will let you follow. Keep your head down. The masonry here is low, and very hard."

My enemy chuckled.

"*Mordieu!* but I have been deceived about American sportsmanship. You would have gouged my eyes out. You bit a nice morsel from my throat—*apropos*, I'll show you the right way to do that some day, if we get out of here alive . . . Steady, now! On your hands and knees . . . here we are."

I FOLLOWED HIM through a low, narrow opening that had been made by prying a few blocks of masonry out of place, and into a tiny cell illuminated with a slim taper. The ceiling was vaulted, and over a dozen feet above the floor.

"This has been my grave for some time." He indicated the brazen panel in the wall.

"There has been entirely too much talk of graves in the past few days," I replied. "Graves with living occupants."

He started at me curiously, almost replied. Then, seeing me eyeing the brazen panel: "*Mais non!*

Even with your bulk and hard head, you couldn't budge that bronze. It doesn't corrode and waste away like the iron in this devil's nest."

"Well then," said I, "how do they feed you?"

"They let food down through a trap in the ceiling. Look!"

I looked up, and saw the outline of a trap-door.

"You look strangely familiar," I began. "I've never seen you, but somehow it is as though I had seen a portrait, or photograph, or heard you compared for likeness to some one I did once see, somewhere."

"No one has seen me for two years or more. But how did you run afoul of Abdul Malaak? Are you also an aspirant to the custody of the Sanctuary?"

He made a curious, fleeting gesture with his left hand.

"Hell's fire, *monsieur*," I replied, "how many custodians, aspirant and actual, does this devil-haunted town hold?"

Then, without pausing for an answer, I threw it at him:

*"When I am dead, open my grave
and see
The smoke that curls about thy
feet."*

"Comment?" he exclaimed.

A home run ! I continued:

*In my dead heart the fire still
burns for thee,
Yea, the smoke rises from my wind-
ing-sheet."*

He stared. I met his stare.

"*Que diable!*" he finally exclaimed. "Who or what your are, I don't know. But you know who I am: de la Tour de Maracq."

"And I am Davis Landon. This meeting with the gentleman who has chanted Mademoiselle Diane to the edge of madness is certainly a pleasure."

The marquis smiled wearily.

"Chanted, and to what end ? From your quotation of Hafiz, I know that she must have heard me, but she couldn't get my thought. Certainly not thus far, at least. So I am buried here, and awaiting the bowstring, or the fire, or the saw and plank: whatever Abdul Malaak in his kindness orders when he has sufficiently poisoned my friends against me. I thought a while ago that they had discovered my loophole and were trying to stop my private explorations. So I gave you a good fight . . ."

For just an instant a fierce light flamed in his eye; and then that thin, weary smile again.

"This is puzzling," I protested. "I happen to know that she did get your message which you 'willed' or projected, or whatever means you used. Every night she wanders in her sleep to obey a summons, and claws at a brazen panel . . ."

"What's that you say?" demanded the marquis. "Wanders in obedience to my summons? Wanders?"

"Yes. From your house which you willed to her on your deathbed in Marrakesh."

"But, monsieur, I never died in Marrakesh."

"That I can readily believe," I admitted. "But she showed me that letter from you, and a newspaper clipping announcing your death, and a note in Arabic from the companion of your last hours. And thus she accepted your legacy, the house on Remparts de Lachepaillet, where she was very conveniently situated to leave by a secret passageway to hell's front door."

THROUGHOUT MY speeck, the marquis stared at me, bewildered.

"I, dying in Marrakesh, willed her that house? . . ."

"Yes, damn it, and hoodooed her with strange dreams of graves to be opened, and voice chanting in Persian. And tonight I followed her through the gateway . . ."

"How's that? Followed her? Is she there?"

"Yes. And that devil touched a spring and dropped me into that dungeon before I could say aye, yes, or no. So you might tell me what started her wanderings."

"*Helas, monsieur*, what can I tell . . ."

"When I quoted Hafiz you seemed to hear familiar words."

"Certainly. I did chant them. I also am an adept. And I chanted the verse of Hafiz for the sake of the rhythm; not to give her a command to come and release me, which she couldn't possibly do, but to ask her to communicate with Nureddin Zenghi, in Kurdistan."

"Why the verse, did you say? What has it to do with Nureddin? That is dense to me."

"*Pardon*. You are not an adept. But to put it simply, it acted merely as a carrier wave, as your radio experts would put it. It gave me a rhythm on which to impress my thought. I can't explain it briefly. But go into Tibet, and High Asia; to Hindustan, among the *fakirs*. Study at the feet of one who might still be found sitting at the foot of a column in the vast ruins of incredible Ankor Wat. Speak with the priests of the Eightfold Path. Piece all your gleanings together; and you will finally be able to project your thoughts to one with

whom you are *en rapport*—if you have the strength of will. The knowledge is jealously guarded. But I found it.

"Had I gone further with the art, I could have projected *myself* from my body, and spoken to her. But I couldn't. Can't yet. And shan't live long enough to learn how."

"When I was reported dead, I was actually in this cell. My enemy tricked me in a contest of occult arts, and here I am. Abdul Malaak . . . Servant of the Angel, as he calls himself. I see it all now. He forged that letter and clipping to get her into my house from which he could summon her to make the trip unobserved. And his concentrated thought aided by the circle of adepts in the great hall, overpowered my message."

"But Nereddin did come to town."

"*Magnifique!* Maybe she did send for him. And he will take the place by assault. He will not fail . . ."

"Nureddin has failed."

And I told what had happened in Pierre's study.

"Then we are doomed," said the marquis.

"Doomed, hell!" I said. "You suggested that we be allies. Now let me take command. Is it near your feeding-time?"

"Yes, So says my stomach," replied the marquis. And then, as he saw me glance once more at the trap-door in the crown of the vault: "Even if I leaped to your shoulders, I couldn't reach it.

"Who said you had to reach it?" I queried.

"How then? demanded the marquis. "They don't get close enough for you to take the guard by surprise as he gives me my food. If they only passed it through that door there!"

"I have an idea. Stand close to the wall, out of sight. Better yet, back out through that hole in the wall . . . "

"But . . . "

"Be damned! Ask no questions, monsieur, or my inspiration will leave me. I have a hunch. Are you with me?"

"To the death and to the uttermost."

I accepted the hand he extended. "And there is another," I added: "Pierre D'Artois."

"None better," admitted the marquis. "There is no love lost between us, but he will not begrudge me any help given you and Diane. But even that d'Artois risks his head if he dares enter."

"Never fear about d'Artois," I reassured the marquis, "but while we have time, tell me this: who

has the hold over Diane's mind? Is it you, or that dried-up thing on the pedestal?"

"Both, it seems. Though he is aided by his circle-of adepts. With them broken up, his power would be comparatively little."

"But would that release her, breaking them up, and him also?"

"Yes. And I will die happy if I personally attend his breaking up. Into small bits, Monsieur Landon. If we get out of here alive, I will dismember him with my bare hands! And since she has obeyed the command, she can be awakened from the influence of the Power . . . "

"There they are now!"

The marquis beckoned me to be silent.

In my turn, I motioned him to crawl out of sight of trap, and followed him.

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" muttered the marquis, obedient, but puzzled.

"Wait and see."

WE HEARD the trap open. A basket was descending at the end of a slim cord.

"Pull that basket up and let down a rope. That isn't heavy enough," I directed in Arabic.

"Why not, *ya margees?*" queried the voice, somewhat taken aback.

"This isn't *el margees, ya bu!*"

I shouted. "Let down that rope and pull him up. He's still breathing, but he won't be when you come back with a rope."

From above I heard a mutter of voices.

"And who are you?" demanded the spokesman.

I heard the clank of arms. My unusual request had been passed along to the guard, doubtless. But as Pierre said, *toujours audace!*

"Come down and see, O heap of offal! One of the master's guests, O eater of pork! Would you argue with me?"

And then, aside to the marquis, "I've got 'em going."

The marquis grinned, and the fire returned to his eyes.

"Give me your rags," I continued, "and we'll fool 'em proper."

"Just a moment, *ya sidi*," resumed the voice, "while we get a strong rope."

"Make haste then, eater of unclean food! I have much else to do than to butcher *Feringhi* swine, down here in the cellar."

"Patience, master," said the voice.

I dug up from my memory a few epithets collected in Mindanao, and growled them in return. They couldn't understand it, and were duly impressed with my importance. By the subdued and respect-

ful murmurings, they must by that time have identified me as one of the master's pet assassins.

But the occasional tinkle of accoutrements and soft note of steel didn't reassure me. The death of the marquis and the lifting up of his body doubtless was of sufficient importance to detain a part of the guard.

A HEAVY ROPE, several centimeters in diameter, was let down.

"Give me more slack! Pigs and fathers of many little pigs, how can I tie this fellow's carcass with that little? And anchor it firmly up there. When you get him up, I'm coming after."

Then to the marquis: "I'll go first, and you follow."

"No, let them haul me up. I can't climb a rope," he whispered.

"You're a damned liar, but since you want the first crack at them, go ahead. But remember you're dead. Don't start the show until I get there."

I tied a running noose and drew it up beneath his arms.

"All right up there! Heave away! And wait for me. I'll tell you what to do with him."

They heaved away.

"Well," I reflected. "I'll be in a pretty jam if something goes hay-wire and that rope doesn't come

down again. That hothead . . . "

By the time the marquis reached the trap, I was in a sweat and a fidget.

"Hurry up there!" I roared. "And let that rope down. Drop him anywhere. He won't hurt you."

"Shall we hoist you, *ya sahib?*"

"Let that rope down, and silence, *ya humar!*"

So far, so good. I had them buffaloed.

I leaped at the rope, and hand over hand, pulled myself up. As I approached the opening, I gripped its edge with one hand, heaved myself through, and sprawled face down on the floor.

"He still breathes, master," said one.

"I forgot my simitar. Give my yours and I'll tend to that."

And as I was solicitously assisted to my knees, the hilt of a blade was thrust into my hand.

I leaped and slashed.

"Give 'em hell, Etienne!" I shouted.

And I laid about me, right and left.

The marquis closed in on the one nearest him, lifted him over his head, and dashed him head-first to the tiles. Then he snatched a blade from the floor, and came on guard.

The four survivors faced us,

dazed by the swift turn. And then they charged. I hacked and slashed clumsily and desperately. Parried, and missed my *riposte*. Lashed out again, and had my blade dashed from my hand by a sweeping cut. Etienne, crouched on guard behind his whirlwind, of steel, faced half to his right saw my peril, and with a dazzling snick of his blade, sliced my adversary's sword arm half off: and back again to his party.

As I booted my disabled enemy into insensibility, I marveled at the incredible skill with which he held those three fierce Kurds at bay.

I gave my opponent's head one farewell bounce against the paving, picked up his blade, and joined Etienne.

"*Gardez-vous!*" he snapped. "I have him!"

He slipped forward in a lunge, blade slicing upward to disembowel his adversary; and back on guard again, with but two to face him.

They were too dazzled by that terrific attack to be aware of my presence. Thus my neck-cut to the one on the right was most creditable.

"*Tenez!*" commanded Etienne, as he confronted the survivor. "I need him."

Standing as though his feet were spiked to the floor, he waved me

aside, engaged his enemy, parrying cut after desperate cut as coolly and effortlessly as though fencing with a blunt foil instead of with blades that sheared from shoulder to hip with one stroke.

The Kurd fought with the savagery of one whose doom stares him in the face. But in vain. He could not crowd or break through the hedge of steel that Etienne built with his leaping, flashing simitar.

Then the Kurd stood there, blinking and bewildered, staring at his empty hand. His blade clanged against the tiles a dozen feet away.

"Now, son of a disease, throw this refuse into the pit. And you, Landon, strip this fellow you kicked senseless. I need his clothes."

The survivor complied without a murmur, and one by one thrust the dead and dismembered down the trap-door.

"Tie that pig!" snapped the marquis.

I obeyed, using a coil of the rope with which we had been hoisted up.

"And now," said the marquis, "Tell us several things, or I will dismember you slice by slice."

The fellow growled.

"What! Tongue-tied? Well, then . . . but no, I will not slice you to pieces . . .

"Landon, pass me that torch."

I plucked the flaming torch from its socket in the wall. Etienne applied it to the Kurd's feet.

"Where is the girl, and what is the master doing?"

The Kurd writhed, and groaned.

"Speak up, dungheap, or I'll roast you alive!"

The smell of flesh roasted before it is dead is not pleasant.

"I will speak, *sahib!*"

"Very well. What is happening in the Throne Room, and what of the girl?"

"The master sits on the high throne. The girl is as one dead, awaiting the command to pass through the veils of fire to become the Bride of the Peacock. It is the night of power."

"The night of power . . . and here we are, two against a company. Landon, will you join me in dying like a man?"

"I don't relish this dying stuff any too damned much, Etienne," I confessed. "But I'll go any reasonable length with you. So lead on."

"Magnifique! Let us go . . ."

And then he turned. "This roasted pig here will spread no alarm," he growled as his blade descended.

We thrust this last body down the trap-door.

THE MARQUIS wiped his

simitar, and led the way. Torches illuminated the passage until the first turn, and thereafter it was lighted by an indirect glow, emanating from a molding along the arched ceiling.

"Your Arabic is acceptable. A lot of these fellows speak only Kurdish or dialects of Turki, but stick to your own, and all will be well. And very few will recognize me in that purple light. None, in fact. They've not seen me for better than two years, and my very existence has been forgotten except by a few jailers."

"There was one who evidently had not forgotten you."

I felt for the little peacock amulet, and found it still about my throat.

"Nureddin was speechless. Handed it to me, and coughed his life out. Since he was your friend, take it."

"Another vengeance to exact. But remember: on your life speak not the Arabic word Satan. Whoever inadvertently pronounces it must then and there be torn to pieces. Nor say any word resembling it. That would be fatal to you, and would draw attention to me."

"What is your plan?"

"I have none. Even as I had none but an urge to explore when I wandered into the darkness and found you. This labyrinth is not

entirely known to me, Keeper of the Sanctuary before Abdul Malaak. But this part of it I know well enough, and our wits will do the rest."

The marquis led the way, down winding passages, up stairways, down others, curving and twisting, never once hesitating at a branch or cross passage. Sentries posted at intersections saluted us perfunctorily; and the marquis negligently returned their salutes.

As we advanced, I picked up the deep booming of the drums. Mingled with it was the wail of reed pipes, and the whines of single-stringed *kemenjahs*.

"Fight it," said the marquis. "Don't let it get a hold on you. Abdul Malaak sits nodding there on that tall throne, impressing his will on the circle of adepts. They receive and amplify it a thousand-fold, and on that a thousandfold more, increasing in geometrical progression. They have but to attune their minds to the vibration frequency."

"Once I saw them project their thought to take material form."

"Juggler!" I scoffed.

"Jugglery if you will. But I saw what I saw: a material entity formed in the vortex of that resonating, countless amplified thought."

"But," continued the marquis, "if you resist it from the beginning, you may hold your own. We may break it up. Tonight's conclave deals with Diane, and thus our escape may not be noted."

As we turned a corner, crossed simitars barred our progress.

Etienne made a curious, fleeting gesture with his left hand.

The sentries raised their blades in salute and advanced us. As we entered the arched doorway of the Throne Room, their blades clicked behind us.

A SMOLDERING somber mist, red as the embers of a plundered city, hung in the air of that great domed hall. A heavy sweetness surged about us, wave on wave. Bearded adepts sat cross legged beneath three-decked, gilded parasols, and caressed with knuckles and finger tips and the heels of their hands the drums of varying sizes which they balanced on their knees. As they played, they swayed in cadence. Their eyes stared fixedly to the front. They were dead men driven by a terrific will.

Against the wall of the circular hall towered a pyramid terraced in steps of glistening black. Tongues of flame quivered up from orifices along the stairway that led to the

dais at the apex. The dais was canopied with gold threaded damask, and crowned with the monstrous effigy of a peacock, tail fanned out, and enameled in natural colors.

On the dais sat the cadaverous Abdul Malaak, that animated mummy that was to smite all France with the devastating thought waves of his adepts. He sat there like a high god. He nodded to the colossal thunder of the drums, and the whining strings, and the wind instruments that moaned of the blacknesses across the Border.

We took our places near the foot of the pyramid, so that we could see the entrance which faced Abdul Malaak. Through it filed a steady stream of devotees, all robed in white, with scarlet girdles from which hung simitars. As they took their places on the cinnabar-powdered floor, they caught the cadence of the music and swayed to its rhythm. From their ranks row after row in a crescent facing the throne, came a hoarse whispering which grew to a solemn chant.

Acolytes marched up and down through the ranks of the communicants, swinging fuming censers. Others, robed in crimson, followed them, bearing copper trays laden with small, curiously shaped lozenges and wafers which they

offered the followers of the Peacock.

The stones beneath us quivered. I could feel the world rocking on its foundations. That maddening music finally spoke in a wordless language of riot and pillage and chaos. And high above the adepts arms crossed on his breast, sat Abdul Malaak, directing the doom.

I thought of the violin note that would shiver a wine-glass; of the ram's-horn trumpets that leveled the walls of Jericho. It wasn't the sound. It was the *thought* that was in resonance, the mind of each individual hammering relentlessly in cadence, doubling and redoubling the sum whenever another of the circle put himself completely in tune. Resonance; perfect timing; until the hatred of one shriveled adept from High Asia would be magnified a millionfold and on that yet again as much more.

The air was tenanted with presences called from over the Border by that demon on his tall black terraced throne. Distinctly above that deep, world-shaking roll and thunder I began to hear twitterings and chirpings and murmurings. *They* were gathering, drawn by the master's restless vortex of power. We were being hemmed in by a congress of evil infinitely greater than all humanity working with one thought could of itself devise.

The puny blasphemies and petty filthinesses of medieval devil-worship were childish against this monumental array of satanism from Kurdistan.

"Fight it, Landon, fight it!" whispered the marquis. "Don't let it get you or you'll join them. Malik Tawus devised no such evil; not in Kurdistan and Armenia, where I learned the true faith to bring it to France."

An acolyte approached with a tray of wafers. The marquis and I both accepted.

"On your life, don't swallow it," he cautioned. "Palm it. With that music you couldn't stand the drug it contains."

"And to think that I brought all this into France," he continued. "Not *this*, tonight, but paved the way for that devil up there to get his hold. His death is more important than your life, or mine, or hers, even."

"If Nureddin were alive . . . "

And then, "Look!" exclaimed Etienne. "Over there!"

DIANE, ARRAYED in wisps of scarlet and silver, and crowned with a strange, tall head-dress that flamed and smoldered with rubies and frosty diamonds, and glowed with great pearls lurid in that sultry light, was escorted by acolytes toward the steps of the pyramid.

Tongues of flame now spurted waist high along the dais and encircled it; and the jets of flame rose taller along the steps.

Pace by pace Diane approached the steep ascent of the pyramid

"She is to pass through the veil of fire and become the Bride of the Peacock," whispered Etienne. "The flames will not hurt her body, but she will be enslaved beyond all demption."

"Maybe we can make a fast break and charge up the steps and finish Abdul Malaak before these fellows come out of their trance," I suggested. "Do you know of any way of getting away after we've done that?"

"Yes. A door behind the throne opens into the *solitarium* where he sits, most of time, in meditation on his pedestal."

"Well, then . . ."

"The flames won't hurt her body," resumed the marquis. "But if one of us starts up there, all he has to do is to press a small catch, and the nature of the flame will change entirely. There are those who have passed through the veil unbidden, but they didn't live long."

Diane had begun the ascent.

Then Abdul Malaak spoke in a great voice, incongruously deep for that emaciated frame.

"Servants of Malik Tawus, I

have summoned you to witness the Night of Power. Thus far we have failed because your lips served me while your hearts betrayed me. Some of you still think of *El Marques* who would not honor me and the message I carried from across the border.

"Others think of Nureddin, who would have kept you in Kurdistan, oppressed by the Moslem, and worshipping the Bright Angel as fugitives hidden in caverns.

"But Nureddin was slain in the act of betraying us to the *Ferringhi* so that he could liberate *El Margees*. But I have devised a doom for *El Margees*; I Abdul Malaak, have thwarted his power, and behold she is seeking me instead of him. Behold; and believe, and give him freely to his doom, even as his comrade in treason was doomed."

"We see and we believe, and we give freely!" came the deep response!

Etienne clutched my arm.

"There is but one chance. I will go first, and settle with Abdul Malaak, and extinguish the flames. You follow, and when the flames subside, take Diane through the door behind the throne."

Etienne leaped to his feet, and three steps up the terrace.

I followed him, drawing my blade.

A MURMUR rose from the devotees.

Abdul Malaak stared, for once disconcerted. Then he shouted a command. The swordsmen stirred in their trance. Abdul Malaak smote a brazen gong at the side side of the dais. Its deep clang touched them to life. They rose. Blades flashed.

Two against that host of madmen. Pierre had failed me. And I was glad that he had failed. Why should he also die in this butchery?

Abdul Malaak leaned forward in his throne. His fingers found and touched a knob: and the flames rose high about the dais, fierce, consuming fire.

"Hold them until I get Abdul Malaak. Then take her away while I cover your retreat!" shouted Etienne as he passed Diane on the stairs."

He leaped through that deadly, blinding flame and at Abdul Malaak on his throne.

Then came a voice loud and clear above the roar of the swordsmen: "Nureddin has returned! Nureddin with the assassin's knife in his chest!"

I turned, just two leaps from the flame-girt dais, where I had overtaken Diane and caught her in my free arm.

And Nureddin it was, drooping mustaches, scar-seamed cheek and

forehead: a Kurd from Kurdistan. He flung aside his robe. A jeweled hilt gleamed from his chest: the very dagger I had seen impale him in Pierre's study!

"Who will exact blood indemnity for the death of Nureddin?"

He strode through the milling throng that parted wide for him.

"What? O dogs and sons of dogs, have you forgotten the bread and salt of Nureddin?"

And the wave of steel that was to overtake and overwhelm us subsided. There was an instant of silence. Then at the feet of the terrace the apparition halted, faced about, clutched at his chest, and wrenched the dagger free.

There came a low murmur from the crowd.

Nureddin hurled the dagger among the dazed swordsmen. "Take it and avenge Nureddin!"

"Ya Nureddin!" shouted one.

"He is our father and grandfather!"

"Nureddin has come from the dead!"

"Fraud and trickery!" shouted another.

"That's no dead man!"

"Kill the impostor!"

"It's Nureddin himself!"

The adherents of Nureddin were forming in a cluster. A simitar rose and flashed swiftly down. Another,

and another. The friends of Nureddin, shoulder to shoulder, were cutting their way into the company. Their number was growing every instant; but still they were outnumbered ten to one.

Nureddin was ascending the terrace, three steps at a time. He halted where I stood, simitar in my sword hand, and my free arm supporting Diane.

The battle at the foot of the terrace was waxing hotter every moment. The friends of Nureddin were being forced back toward the wall. A dozen or twenty of the enemy were charging up the terrace to cut down the impostor, and me also.

Nureddin thrust at me a pair of Boukhara saddle-bags.

I dropped my blade, and took them.

Each of his hands emerged with an object a little larger than a goose egg. Then he tossed them one with each hand: grenades! They burst full among the enemy, halting the charge with their deadly, flaming phosphorous. Another grenade. And yet another. The assault broke and fled, howling and aflame.

And then Nureddin rained his grenades into the mob below.

Even in this damned place of madness, I knew now that this was no dead man.

"We're out of fire!" he growled in guttural Arabic. "Some high explosive!"

And that fierce Kurd, withdrawing the safety pins and holding the grenades to the last split second, hurled them so that they burst as they landed, rending and blasting the enemy.

The friends of Nureddin were now advancing, slaying-mad and frenzied by the fire and explosive that dead Nureddin had hurled at the enemy.

"*Ya Nureddin!*" they shouted. "*Nureddin has returned with the fires of Jehannum!* *Ya Nureddin!*"

I glanced at the throne. The terrific, searing heat had subsided; and flames were scarcely ankle-high. Etienne was clambering to his feet. He reeled, and tottered. Blood streamed from his mouth. His smile was terrible.

Then he stooped, picked an armful from the throne, and advanced down the terrace toward us.

"I told you I'd do it. Sorry you couldn't watch and take your lesson." He laughed as he wiped his lips. "Look!"

I saw from the torn throat of his burden that he had made good his boast.

Then Etienne with a supreme effort pitched the remains of Abdul Malaak headlong into the bedlam below.

The Kurd was hurling his last grenade.

One last detonation, muffled by the bodies it blasted and seared.

"Etienne," I demanded, "before we get into that butchery, release her so that her mind will be free."

"*Tres bien!*"

He turned to Diane, stroked her cheeks, whispered in her ear, shook her sharply, whispered again, tapped her here and there with his knuckles.

Her scream was piercingly natural and feminine. Diane the automaton had become a woman again.

"Oh, Etienne, I did find you! You weren't dead after all!"

"Found me, but not for long. Follow Landon out of here. Quick! I'm a dead man. Breathed too much of that flame. I'm following Nureddin."

He kissed her and broke away from her arms.

"Well, if you're following Nureddin, you're going in the wrong direction," said a calm voice at our side, not in guttural Arabic, but in French. "And here's your pistol, Landon."

Nureddin, nothing! Pierre d'Artois!

"Stand fast, fool!" he shouted, seizing Etienne's shoulder. "Nureddin's friends are winning. And dead Nureddin is avenged."

"Then," retorted Etienne, as he recognized Pierre, "take Diane out of here. This time I won't return to haunt her."

Etienne saluted us with his blade. "Swear not to follow me! The last will of the dead. I don't want to waste what little life is left . . .

Pierre stared at him for a moment, and saw that Etienne spoke the truth. "You have my word."

Pierre's blade rose in salute; and then he turned the throne.

"Oh, Etienne!" cried Diane, at that moment realizing his intentions.

But Etienne did not hear her.

As I followed Pierre, I glanced over her shoulder and saw Etienne, blade flaming in a great arc, charge headlong into the melee. His similar rose and fell, shearing slashing. His voice rang exultant with slaughter. Then we heard his voice no more.

I half carried, half dragged Diane through the panel behind the throne into the *solitarium* of Abdul Malaak, and thence, finally, through the winding passages to Diane's apartment.

"TELL ME," I demanded of d'Artois the next day, "why you ordered me to follow Diane into the den of madness?"

"That was an error which I didn't recognize until after it was

all over," admitted Pierre. "But since you acquitted yourself as you did, I claim a free pardon for having unwittingly sent you to face the Keeper of the Sanctuary instead of going myself.

"I had what you call the hunch," he continued. "It came to me in a flash that my idea of impersonating Nureddin would succeed. You understand, I had toyed with the notion from the day of his death. I knew that Nureddin would have enough of a following to divide the conclave if he suddenly appeared, risen from the grave.

"The disguise was easy. My nose is about right by nature. Those scars on the cheek and forehead, and the mustaches, and the eyebrows were simple. Just a few touches, and the essentials were there. And that dagger—well, that was one of those flexible-bladed weapons used on the stage, in sword-swallowing acts. But convincing, *bein'*?"

"Finding my way into that den was not so difficult. Nureddin before his death mentioned Porte d' Espagne. I checked against Vauban's plans, and then made soundings with instruments such as prospectors use in your country to locate those oil domes. My men—you saw them, and remarked, that afternoon as we drove by—found considerable subter-

ranean cavities where the plans showed none.

"And since I knew enough of the ritual of Malik Tawus, my detection as an impostor was very improbable."

"But what set you on the trail, originally?" I asked.

"Etienne's letter," replied Pierre. "I knew it for a forgery the moment I noticed that it had been written by someone who, being used to Arabic, which is written from *right* to *left*, forgot in his careful forging that Etienne would cross him's t's from *left* to *right*.

"*Alors*, that sufficed. Then I telephoned Paris headquarters, where they have a file of every newspaper in the world. There was no such article in any paper printed in Morocco as the one Diane gave me.

"Thus I knew that someone was using Etienne's alleged death as a means of getting Diane into Etienne's house, where memories of him would make her an easy victim to the psychic influences that were directed toward her.

"And according to his remarks before you two escaped from his cell, the marquis had also been seeking to project a thought to her. And between the two forces . . .

"Just a moment," I interrupted. "Why did Abdul Malaak go to all the trouble of projecting his thought

to Diane when a couple of his men could have seized and dragged her down there?

"Why bother to prepare the stage setting of Etienne's death? Just oriental indirectness?"

"Not at all! Don't you see," explained Pierre, "that they wanted not merely Diane in person; they wanted her as a slave of the will of Abdul Malaak. And when she had succumbed to his will sufficiently to begin her nocturnal wanderings and pick her way to the door, he would know that she was truly in his power, and ready for the next step, becoming an automaton whose activities as a spy could be controlled no matter where she went.

"But, *grace à Dieu*—with certain credit to Pierre d'Artois—Mademoiselle Diane's mind is freed, not only by the death of Etienne and Abdul Malaak, but also by having obeyed the command which had been impressed so firmly on her subconscious mind.

"And therefore, *mon vieux*," he continued, "since she is done for ever with opening graves in her sleep, you must during the remain-

der of your stay in Bayonne divert her mind from those gruesome memories. So out of my sight for the evening. I have work to attend to. *Allez!*" And thus on that, and on other evenings, I sought Diane with more confidence than I had any right to have.

"SOMEHOW," said Diane one night as we sat on the tall gray wall of Lache-paillet, watching the moon-silvered mists rise from the moat and roll into the park, far below, "that moment's meeting with Etienne was so unreal. It was as if he'd appeared from the dead to put my mind at rest rather than that he was actually alive. In a way, he died two years ago, instead of on that made, terrible night . . . not a fresh grief, but the calming of an old sorrow . . . if you know what I mean . . ."

And then and there, as Pierre would put it, I had the hunch.

"You mean," said I, "that the Bride of the Peacock could be pleased with a much less colorful bird?"

Which was precisely what Diane had in mind.

Nice Old House

by *Dona Colson*

"DON'T BE SILLY," she told herself. "There's nothing wrong with this house. It's a perfectly normal house. There's certainly nothing at all to be uneasy about." Joel would laugh at her. He always did if she said how she felt about the house. She couldn't stand that.

"You're a product of your time," he would say good naturedly. "If it isn't chrome and glass and doesn't have a brand new price tag hung on it, then you

can't like it. Try to grow up a little, Alisa."

His complacency was infuriating. It didn't seem to bother him that she couldn't like the place the way he did.

She sat on the edge of the big blue sofa. Her eyes took in the faded maroon armchair sitting by the door. It seemed to be crouching, waiting to spring on her. The two curved pieces of wood decorating the arms glistened like tusks. The two shiny buttons on the back

Where would you find a house like this today?
But to Alisa, the closet was a place of terror.

cushion, like beady eyes, stared back at her.

Alisa's lips tightened into a thin line. "You're stupid and ugly!" she said to the chair. Then she laughed and shook her head. "Cut it out. It's just a lousy, stupid, furnished house. Don't pay any attention to it," she told herself, "And you'll probably get used to it."

But she knew that when Joel got home she would be after him again. He liked the house so much. It was really more than she could stand.

"It's a funny old fashioned house," he would say, patting the wall. "But it's been alone so long that it's forgotten how to get along with people." Then he would smile, and she knew what he was thinking: They couldn't possibly rent a place any cheaper.

She couldn't deny that. It was a very ugly, but practical place, and above all, Joel was practical. Alisa tapped her chin and sighed.

She leaned back in the prickly sofa and looked around the room. Her eyes skipped over the maroon armchair and rested briefly on the brownish yellow lace curtains lopsidedly covering the front windows, dimming the afternoon sunlight. The sunlight dappled a fat gray chair in the corner. It looked like

an overstuffed barrel, out of scale with the other furniture.

"No one would ever ask *you* to dance," Alisa sneered. She giggled, and was startled at the intrusion it made in the prim silence, guarded by that disapproving furniture.

SHE SHIFTED to the edge of the sofa again, not liking the soft, familiar way it molded itself to her body. "Stupid sofa," she said out loud, determined to undermine the silence. "Of all the sofas I've sat on in my whole life, you are undoubtedly the stupidest ever." She banged her heel hard against the sofa leg.

The closet door to her right silently swung open. She jumped up and stepped away from the sofa. "Damn it!" That closet door was always swinging open, no matter how carefully she closed it. Joel would laugh when it happened.

"Just wants a little attention," he would say. "Wants to let you know it's still around."

She shuddered and walked over to the closet and slammed the door hard. "There!" she said. "You can't catch me this time."

She turned to walk back to the sofa, and the door banged open behind her. She jumped away, clutching at the sofa arm. She turned and stared at the door. "Good

God," she snapped. "Joel had better listen to me once and for all! I've had about all I can take of this place."

She saw out of the corner of her eye that the window curtain was gently moving. "Too windy," she muttered and walked over to close the window. She stopped halfway across the room. "It's not open. I didn't open the window today because it was too cool." The gray window glass reflected her face back at her, and the curtain swayed once more and hung silent again, waiting.

Alisa was frightened now. It had seemed ridiculous, at first, to let her imagination get carried away; but this was not her imagination any more.

The curtain moved again, coiled around on itself, and stretched out toward Alisa. She backed away quickly and bumped into the sofa. She looked behind her; the closet was gaping open.

"The closet! That's where it wants me to go!" The chairs crouched in their corners impatiently, and the closet waited, wide and dark. "Oh no, I won't!" she cried. "I won't go in there!" The sofa rubbed her leg with its nubbly blue arm. The curtains at the windows congealed the sunlight into dull brown, like rust flaking into the room.

The sofa, she noticed, felt warm. "It's trying to push me into the closet. No you don't, you stupid sofa!" Alisa climbed onto the sofa. "Now you just try to get me into that closet!" She lay down on her stomach and clung full length to the sofa, holding tight. "Oh Joel, why don't you come home?"

"It's just a lonely old spinster house," Joel would say. "It needs love and it'll bloom again. Why, look at this lovely old furniture. It has real character. You can't get that sort of furniture nowadays at all." And then he would sitdown on the sofa as though it were a rare and fragile antique. "Really well made," he would say, and pat the arm approvingly. Alisa would blow up at this point. Joel was really more than she could take sometimes.

ALISA CLUNG tightly to the sofa cushions. The nubbly blue material was only inches from her eyes. She could see shreds of lint and dust caught in the threads and she noticed the brighter material on the side of the cushion where it hadn't gotten dirty. It was ugly, but it looked normal enough.

She tried to shift her weight. *The damn thing really molds itself to fit the body, she thought. I feel like I'm sinking into it.* Her body seemed heavy and stiff and

she made another effort to move.

"Oh no," she moaned. She had really fallen into the trap. The house hadn't wanted her in the closet at all; it had wanted her right here, just where she was, on the sofa. She tried to roll over, but her body lay there like a tired wooden doll. She struggled to lift her head, but she couldn't even move it. She was sinking, sinking into the sofa. Her chin, hands, chest, and toes were already caught in a warm, unmoving grip, disappearing into the sofa.

She tried to scream then, but it was too late. Her mouth was enveloped, and her nose, and only her eyes were bulging out, not really seeing anything any more. Then her ears, back, legs, and finally, at last, her heels and the back of her head, sinking.

THE MAROON CHAIR'S buttons shone in the dimming sunlight. The front door clicked open.

"Alisa? Where are you? It's Joel." He dropped his briefcase by the door. "Alisa?"

He walked into the living room. The closet door was still open, and he crossed the room to close it. "That's a nice house," he said and gently pushed it shut. It stayed closed. "Alisa?" he called again. "Oh well," he muttered. "I guess she went out shopping."

He crossed the hall into the dining room. "Guess I'll read the paper here till she gets back and fixes supper." He sat down at the table and spread the newspaper out. He started at the front page, worked through to the sports, and was starting in on the entertainment section when he smelled the Beef Stroganoff.

"Mmmmm." He dropped the newspaper to the floor, and he went into the kitchen. There was a big plate heaped with Beef Stroganoff, rice, green salad with Roquefort dressing, little pickled beets, and deviled egg sprinkled with flecks of paprika. A small bowl was filled with home made custard pudding, and the sweet smell of nutmeg made his mouth water.

He picked the dishes off the sideboard and took them into the dining room where he placed them on the table. He took a big bite of rice and Beef Stroganoff.

"It's really delicious! Alisa, you've never cooked anything quite this good before." He looked up from plate suddenly. "Alisa!" he called sharply. He looked around. She wasn't in the kitchen; he would have noticed if she had been. He shrugged, and went back to eating, scraping heaping piles of rice onto his spoon. It was un-

doubtedly the best meal he had ever eaten.

AFTER THE big plate was empty and the little custard bowl scraped clean, he strolled back out into the living room.

"What's this?" Joel said. A neat little pile of glittering objects was heaped at the foot of the sofa. He prodded at it with his finger; it looked mostly like hairpins. He poked at it again and some little irregular pieces of metal that looked like tooth fillings fell out. Joel could see something else underneath the hairpins, something gold. He carefully separated it out. "Alisa's wedding ring, and her bracelet and wrist watch. Well," Joel said. He stood for a minute looking at the glittering pile.

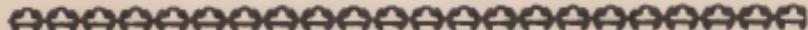
He turned around and went into the kitchen. When he returned to the living room he had a coffee tin

in his hand, and he scooped the little heap off the sofa into the trash. He crossed the hall and went through the kitchen to the back door, where a shovel stood, and he took the shovel outside with him.

It was dark now, and the tall hedge sheltered the back yard from the neighbors. Joel walked over by a low bush near the back of the yard, and started digging. He didn't have to dig very much before he had a hole quite big enough for the coffee tin.

He carefully replaced the dirt over the tin, wiped the shovel off, and went back into the house. He put the shovel into the storage closet and entered the living room.

The lace curtains swayed toward him softly, and tickled his ear. The maroon chair nuzzled at his hand. "That's a nice house," Joel smiled. "They just don't make houses like this any more."



Those Who Seek

by August Derleth

(author of Ferguson's Capsules, The Tottenham Werewolf)

MR. JASON PHILLIPS had no intention of going to the abbey, but when young Arnsley discovered that he was an artist, he simply had to go—there was no getting out of it. He had protested mildly at first; he had still to finish the painting of the castle, and he had promised himself a few spare moments in which to ramble around

the estate of Lord Leveredge, Arnsley's father. But his objections were overruled by a wave of the hand, and consequently Phillips found himself on this October morning seated before his easel, staring miserably at the ruins of the abbey that had so caught young Arnsley's fancy.

It was very old, and quite like

. . . and the faded old inscription on the slab translated to: "Those who seek, shall find . . . "

My very first encounter with the tales of AUGUST DERLETH was an unillustrated short-short story, *The Captain is Afraid*, which ran in the first issue of *WEIRD TALES* I ever read, dated October 1931. The second was with the present story, very ably illustrated by Joseph Doolin, as you will see farther on. It is quite true that one's first encounters with weird tales are likely to seem far better than they really are when re-read at a later age; and I agree with the author that he did, indeed, write better stories later on—but several re-readings leave me with the feeling that this story still has a good deal of power to it.

many other abbeys that Phillips had had the pleasure of seeing. However, Phillips noticed at once that the building was fairly well preserved for its age—which, Arnsley said, dated back into the Roman invasion period, some said long before. The second and third floors of the building were almost gone; only a few supports projected into the air here and there. But the first floor, hidden for the most part by a dense growth of vines and bushes, was remarkably well preserved. Deep-set windows could be seen through the bushes, and over toward the cloister walk was a huge door which so engaged the artist's fancy that he decided to

paint the abbey so as to feature the cloister walk and the door.

Mr. Phillips started his charcoal drawing. He made a few tentative strokes and erased them. After a moment of study, he repeated the process. There was something about the view of the cloister walk that escaped Phillips. He leaned away from the canvas and regarded the abbey in silent irritation. He tried the charcoal drawing again, with more precision this time. After a short time he put down his charcoal. He did not seem to be able to sketch the abbey as he saw it—there was a feeling as of someone guiding the charcoal. Phillips felt vaguely and unreasonably ill at ease.

IT WAS PERHAPS the gruesome history of the abbey with which Arnsley had regaled him on the way up, added to his own previous knowledge. Of the actual building of the abbey, little seemed to be known. There was one date, the earliest, at 477 A.D., which Lord Leveredge had given out as the date the abbey was taken from the Celts by the Saxons. It was Lord Leveredge's idea that the Celts had erected the abbey first as a temple of Druidic worship, and recent discoveries about the grounds had unearthed nothing to oppose that theory. Indeed, sev-

eral of the leading authorities stood in agreement with Lord Leveredge, and in a subsequent history of the place, this point was emphasized beyond all proportions. There was then a gap of three hundred years in the abbey's history.

In 777 A.D. the abbey appeared in the contemporary histories once more. There was a curious story of the strange disappearance of a party of Danes who besieged the place, at this time still a temple. Phillips recalled that he had read of the old-time bards who sang about this legend. This was perhaps the first of the incidents that gave the abbey a sinister reputation. Another occurred in 1537, during the time of Henry VIII, when the temple, then an abbey, was raided by a band of His Majesty's Reformation mercenaries. The abbey was at the time unoccupied, but strange unaccountable rumors had reached from generation to generation hinting at the awful things that happened there at the time of the raid. Arnsley recalled newspaper accounts of the "Dark people" of the abbey, the ghosts of long-dead monks who marched forever along the cloister walk, telling their beads and reading their breviaries. The abbey, in consequence, had a reputation of being haunted.

There was, too, a story not so legendary, that had happened only four years before. A fisherman had wandered into the abbey to sleep; it was common for these fisher folk to sleep in secluded places along the nearby coast where they plied their trade. The following morning this man was found wandering in a dazed condition on the seacoast. At first he could say nothing, and later, when some semblance of speech had been restored, he mumbled incoherently about songs and prayers, and there had been something of green eyes watching him. Two days after he had partly recovered, he disappeared. When a searching-party had been sent out, he was found dead and horribly mangled in the abbey. Of the means by which he came by his death, nothing was ever discovered. There were curious marks on the man's body, deep claw-like tears in the flesh, and a ghastly whiteness led to the examination which showed that there was no drop of blood in the body—the man had either bled so profusely, or had been drained.

But this ruminations was taking time, and Phillips, suddenly coming back to reality, reached quickly for his charcoal and again began his sketch, which seemed to go somewhat more easily this time.

MR. PHILLIPS had just completed his charcoal drawing when Arnsley appeared from inside the abbey and called to the artist to come in for a moment. With an annoyed smile, Phillips arose, and made his way slowly through the bushes to the spot where Arnsley stood.

"Well," he began as he came on, "what is it?" There was a petulant note of vexation in his voice which quite escaped Arnsley.

"I came across an inscription, old man, and I wonder if you could read it. It's Latin, I think, but so curiously wrought and so old, that I'm not sure if I'm reading it rightly—though I seem to be able to make out the lettering."

"Oh!" said Phillips, somewhat nettled.

"Just follow me," said Arnsley. He turned and entered the abbey and progressed swiftly along the corridor parallel to the cloister walk. "It's along in the corridor here." His voice came over his shoulder to Mr. Phillips, and he half turned to regard the artist in the subdued light of the corridor walk.

"Go on," said Phillips quickly, thinking of the charcoal drawing he was about to paint. "Go on."

"Seems to be on some sort of slab, I should say," continued Arnsley, as if he had not heard.

"And it's almost obliterated—you'd expect that, wouldn't you?" Arnsley stopped suddenly. "Here we are."

Arnsley had come up before a rectangular slab of stone, set, as closely as the artist could determine, directly in the center of the corridor. Phillips bent to peer at the inscription that Arnsley indicated with his cane.

"What is it?" asked Arnsley after a moment.

"It's Latin, of course—just as you thought."

"Well, that seems to indicate that this place has Roman beginnings after all, eh?"

Phillips grunted irritably; he remembered that, despite the authorities, Arnsley had held to his belief regarding the abbey as a product of the Roman invasion. "If this building was founded by the Romans of the first invasion, that inscription was put on a considerable time after. As nearly as I can make it out it reads QUI PETIVERENT INVENIENT, and that, literally translated, is a quotation from the Christian Bible—"Those Who Seek Shall Find." Where did you get the idea that this place is Roman, Arnsley?"

"Oh! I strike upon that as the best bet," said Arnsley, shrugging. "I'm told though, that there's a priest over in Wallington who's got

an old paper on the abbey, and he seems to think much as I do. I went over once to see his paper, but the old fellow wasn't at home, and his housekeeper was pretty chary about letting strangers mess about the priest's papers. The name's Richards. Father Richards; I've an idea you could get quite a bit of material from him if you wanted it. He's an authority on old abbeys and cathedrals."

Phillips raised his eyebrows. "Surely your father must have something on the abbey?"

Arnsley shook his head. "Though he's custodian of the abbey for the government, he hasn't anything in his library pertaining to this place. Nor, curiously enough, has he ever cared to discuss the abbey with me. Off and on, he's given me a few vague facts, but most of what I know I've picked up from hearing conversations with archeologists who visit him. He clings pretty strongly to the Druidic beginning of the place, but when I said something to him about it one day, he dismissed the subject pretty sharply. Also, he seems to believe that there's something pretty much wrong about this place. I daresay that grows out of an experience he had here himself.

"He was up around this region hunting one day. Coming by here

after dark, he swears he heard someone chanting here, and saw in a yellowish-gray half-light a procession of black cowled figures. He recalled that there were stories of the ghostly monks who haunted this place. None of us pays any attention to the story; his flask was perfectly empty when he reached home—and he can't usually carry that much in him."

Phillips laughed cautiously. Arnsley looked down at the slab. "Do you suppose it means anything?" he asked. "Perhaps it refers to some definite thing?"

"Rot Arnsley. It's quite probable that the monks had that inscription put there. You'll find others, I daresay, if you look."

Arnsley looked at Phillips with a curious smile on his face. "It's odd that you should think of that at once. I thought so, too, and I took the trouble to look around before I called you. There aren't any other inscriptions."

"Very likely," returned Phillips imperturbably. "You see that this inscription is almost obliterated. Perhaps those others were not so fortunate."

"Perhaps," conceded Arnsley reluctantly, still keeping his gaze on the slab.

MR. PHILLIPS shrugged and stamped out of the building to

where his easel stood. Arnsley sank to his knees and began to examine the slab in the most minute detail. Contrary to Mr. Phillips, he did not believe that the inscription had been put there merely as a matter of devotion, so that the monks who walked this path hour after hour in years long gone by, heads cast down, lips moving in silent prayer, should see as they passed, this eternal word, and seeing, hope and seek to penetrate the veil. But nothing came of the scrutiny Arnsley gave the slab.

He rose at last, and, filled with a sudden hope, cast his eye about for a lost stone, or an old worn bracket. He had suddenly conceived the idea that this slab might hide some secret passage, long forgotten — probably even now impassable. A stone about three times the size of his clenched fist, almost hidden in the semi-darkness of the corridor, rewarded his search. Without hesitation, he seized it and began to pound upon the slab. After some moments he stopped; the effort seemed quite futile. He thought he detected a hollow sound from behind the slab, but he could not be sure; the difference that had caught his attention was at all events very slight. Then, too, he argued, the stone must be very thick — so thick that the pounding of this small instrument would not

establish much. He stood up and dropped the stone, throwing it over toward the corridor wall.

Through a cloister window he caught sight of Mr. Phillips industriously daubing his canvas. He began to wish that they had not planned to stay here during the night, so as to give the artist ample time to put the finishing touches to his picture the following day. If only Mr. Phillips had protested against carrying the blanket rolls! Arnsley could not explain his attitude; it was he, in the first place, who had suggested staying the night. It was perhaps the impending heaviness in the atmosphere that depressed Arnsley — so, at least, he concluded, after looking at the ominous black clouds low on the horizon. With an impatient sigh, he went out and got the blanket rolls and the little kit of tools they had brought, and took them into the abbey. He deposited them in the corner of one of the most sheltered rooms; then he came out toward Mr. Phillips, who had painted in his background, and was starting now on the cloister walk, which he could not do completely because the background might mix with the color of it at the edges.

IT WAS LATE afternoon before Phillips put aside the paint-

ing. Then Arnsley and he had a light lunch, after which they spent the remaining hour of daylight wandering about the abbey and the woodland surrounding it. They had decided to retire early, so that they could leave the abbey before noon of the following day; consequently there was still a faint red line on the western horizon when they disrobed and rolled themselves into their blankets.

Although Arnsley slept immediately, Phillips tossed restlessly about for almost an hour. He could not rid himself of an uneasy feeling of impending disaster, and fear crept upon him from the darkness of the starless night. He sank at last into a state of dream-haunted slumber. He dreamed of vast expanses of blackness, where life crept about shrouded forever in the darkness of the pit. He saw immense black landscapes, where great gaunt figures of ancient Saxons, whose hard, cruel faces gleamed beneath their hoods, were arrayed like giant colossi. From the blackness a shape took form; there was a great gray stone building, crude as only the hands of far past ancestors could make it. And there were rows upon rows of cowled figures marching in triumphant procession about the stone circle, and away into the blackness of the sky. There was a huge stone

pillar, from the flat top of which great streams of red ran into black maws open to receive it.

There was a sudden flash of white, and Phillips saw in his dream a great green thing, faint against the sky, that flailed the air with long red tentacles, suckers dripping blood, and spattering it over the kneeling figures of supplianting worshipers. There was a haze again, that dropped like a velvet curtain, and again came the black ones, moving in and out among the worshipers, here and there signing to one to follow. Then this, too, was gone; covered with a great whiteness, like an impenetrable fog that swirled impotently about.

There was a familiar landscape now, and there were figures of men running wildly from something that slobbered and gibbered as it came after them, catching them one after the other with its swinging tentacles. In his dream Phillips saw suddenly the whiteness of fear-stricken faces. There were great towering hulks of men who cringed in abject fear. From the far north these Danes had come to conquer, and a sudden, awful death had come forth to meet them. There were others, too, smaller, frailer men, arrayed in the colors of the Tudors, who gibbered and frothed, thrown flat upon the



illustration by
Joseph Doolin

ground. Some, maddened, beat their heads upon the rocks on the countryside, while ever there loomed that great green-black thing that flailed these helpless men with reddened tentacles. Then there came a single face, a countenance so horrible in its fear that it caused Phillips to move uneasily in his sleep. The face vanished suddenly, and there was a man running, stumbling over the fields, fleeing aimlessly, and coming at last upon the place from which he had start-

ed—the ghoul-haunted ruins of the abbey! Again, flight, and black-robed priests who sat and waited, watching for the return of him who fled away into the night. There was an unholy light about the faces of the watchers.

Gradually, now, other things took shape. In his dream Phillips suddenly recognized the cloister walk of the abbey, and he saw in flaming letters the inscription on the slab—forming out of nothingness, one by one, QUI PETIVERENT. INVENIENT. There was an endless dancing motion of the letters, and a brightness of flames, and a timelessness of meaning that

awed the haunted mind of the sleeping artist. The letters stood alone in whiteness, but there were suddenly great clouds of swirling mist, and a blackness of figures impinged again upon Phillips' dream vision. From the darkness below he saw a long greenish-red thing licking out into the mist, where now formed the fear-drawn faces of men—Saxons, Danes, and there were the round faces of monks, grotesque in fear.

There was a great redness, as of blood, and a chanting, a mumbling indescribable came up from below. There was a knowledge in his dream that enabled Phillips to know this ancient chant, this ceremonial prayer which was wafted to him. There now arose a ghastly ululation, and out of the cloister windows floated a loathsome, putrid blue-gray light. Out of the earth came eery mad chanting that crept away into the night. The mist that hovered above resolved itself into a long hand that swayed to and fro in the air above the slab and at last descended gracefully toward the low windows of the cloister. Down, down, it came, and at last it touched with sudden pressure upon the second of the three low sills just opposite the slab. Immediately the slab was flung upward, like the rebound of a trap-door. Then, from nowhere, came

the black ones again, descending into the blackness beneath the opened walk. There were dozens of them, and hundreds—it seemed as if the procession would never end.

MR. PHILLIPS had no knowledge of that time of the night he was disturbed; he only knew that it was a sudden sharp cry that brought him out of his sleep. He sat up and looked over at his companion's bed. Arnsley was not there. He jumped up and began to search around in the half-light for his trousers. He had just got hold of them when the cry was repeated. It sounded very much like a cry for help, and it arose from nearby, from within the abbey itself, on the ground floor.

Mr. Phillips hastily clothed himself, took hold of the hammer in the small tool kit they had brought along—the only weapon that came to hand—and crept warily out into the corridor, for it was from there that the cry seemed to come. He stood for a moment listening. From along the corridor came a succession of faint sounds, as of someone walking slowly into the distance—some heavy things, someone carrying a bulky object, or a mass of creatures moving in rhythmic unison.

Tightening his grip on the hammer, Phillips went resolutely for-

ward. As he advanced, he saw in the moonlight filtering through the slits of windows that the inscribed slab had been moved; it lay to one side of the black gap in the walk. Phillips paused. Could Arnsley have dreamed as he had? He shot a quick glance toward the window-sills; the second was depressed—and Arnsley could not have known except as the artist had dreamed! Phillips was seized with a sudden, horrible dread; for a moment he stood as if grown to the spot. He was afraid to move; something seemed to warn him not to go farther. He felt a sudden, unaccountable urge to turn and flee, but he thought again of Arnsley and of the cries he had heard in the stillness. In the night his frightened mind conjured up before him the vision of the fisherman he had heard about.

He went tentatively forward, his hand tightly closed about the handle of the small hammer. He crept closer and closer to the opening. He was still horribly afraid, but he was possessed of an awful curiosity, stimulated by his fear, that drove him forward to the opening. Faintly now, he could still hear the weird rhythmic walking sound, but it came from afar, and Phillips wondered whether it could not be the far-off beating of the sea waves against the rocky coast. In

his interest, he almost forgot Arnsley. Suddenly recalling his companion, the artist called loudly: "Arnsley!" Phillips threw himself to the floor and bent his head to look into the black, yawning chasm below the corridor's stone floor.

What happened next is very vague in Mr. Phillips' mind. He maintains that he saw nothing, but there was an awful, a ghastly stench that met him full as he looked into the blackness. There came a sharp succession of faint screams, and a low, horrible moaning that sent the artist stumbling and blinded out onto the highway, where he fell prone in the welcome glare of an oncoming Daimler.

MR. PHILLIPS lay for weeks in a state of delirium. From scraps of mumblings that the artist gave issue to while delirious, investigators branched their work to the abbey on Lord Leveredge's estate. The inscribed slab was in its place, but by depression of a slab in the sill of one of the windows, the inscribed slab was forced upward. In a moldy crypt below, the barely recognizable body of Arnsley was found. There were peculiar marks all over the body, as if tiny suckers had attached themselves to its pores. He was devoid of blood, and most of the bones of his body

were crushed. The coroner's inquest decided that he had met his death at the hands of persons or things unknown. The equipment found in the abbey, together with the artist's canvas, was returned to Phillips. Phillips hardly recognized the canvas as his work.

It was two months before the artist, still weak, was released from the hospital. Phillips immediately entrained from Manchester to Wallington, where he called upon Father Richards, from whom he hoped to gain some slight knowledge of the horror at the abbey. There was something about the painting, too, that Phillips had discovered after a close scrutiny.

Mr. Phillips found the priest quite willing to talk, and the artist let him ramble on for some little time before he came to the canvas. He produced it suddenly, and showed it to the priest, whose chubby face plainly showed his utter astonishment.

"Why, my dear sir," he said in awe, casting a suspicious glance at the artist, "this is an almost perfect reproduction of a scene that you could never have seen. There is a reversal of the cloister walk and door; you have painted it as it was in the old temple, not as it

is now—and there are a hundred odd details. The picture you have here is that of an old Briton-Romanized temple to a strange pagan deity—the God of Life, more often called the God of Blood by the worshipers and present-day archeologists. I have a picture of the god somewhere; you understand, a picture drawn from imagination. It makes me shudder. It's in color, and shows the god with his black-robed attendants. The god is like a huge black-green jelly, and seems equipped with minute suckers and tentacles, much like an octopus. It resembles a sea creature very much, giving off a blue-gray light, and flaring a bright green from its eyes. It is said to have been fed on blood.

"Since the abbey is not far from the coast, there are many archeologists who maintain that there was once an underground passage from the sea to the abbey, connecting, they say, to a crypt below the corridor. I don't know, of course. One thing puzzles me about the whole business; did the Christians know of this devilish worship or not?

"If not, who in the world put that Latin inscription on that slab in the corridor?"

John Bartine's Watch

by Ambrose Bierce

"THE EXACT TIME? Good God! my friend, why do you insist? One would think—but what does it matter; it is easily bedtime—isn't that near enough? But, here, if you must set your watch, take mine and see for yourself."

With that he detached his watch—a tremendously heavy, old-fashioned one—from the

chain, and handed it to me; then turned away, and walked across the room to a shelf of books, began an examination of their backs. His agitation and evident distress surprised me; they appeared reasonable. Having set my watch by his, I stepped over to where he stood, and said, "Thank you."

As he took his timepiece and

He could not stand being asked the time in the evening, prior to eleven o'clock.

reattached it to the guard I observed that his hands were unsteady. With a tact upon which I greatly prided myself, I sauntered carelessly to the sideboard and took some brandy and water; then, begging his pardon for my thoughtlessness, asked him to have some and went back to my seat by the fire, leaving him to help himself, as was our custom. He did so and presently joined me at the hearth, as tranquil as ever.

This odd little incident occurred in my apartment, where John Bartine was passing an evening. We had dined together at the club, had come home in a cab and—in short, everything had been done in the most prosaic way; and why John Bartine should break in upon the natural established order of things to make himself spectacular with a display of emotion, apparently for his own entertainment, I could nowise understand. The more I thought of it, while his brilliant conversational gifts were commanding themselves to my inattention, the more curious I grew, and of course had no difficulty in persuading myself that my curiosity usually assumes to evade resentment. So I ruined one of the finest sentences of his disregarded

monologue by cutting it short without ceremony.

"John Bartine," I said, "you must try to forgive me if I am wrong, but with the light that I have at present I cannot concede your right to go all to pieces when asked the time o' night. I cannot admit that it is proper to experience a mysterious reluctance to look your own watch in the face and to cherish in my presence, without explanation, painful emotions which are denied to me, and which are none of my business."

To this ridiculous speech Bartine made no immediate reply, but sat looking gravely into the fire. Fearing that I had offended I was about to apologize and beg him to think no more about the matter, when looking me clamly in the eyes he said:

"My dear fellow, the levity of your manner does not at all disguise the hideous impudence of your demand; but happily I had already decided to tell you what you wish to know, and no manifestation of your unworthiness to hear it shall alter my decision. Be good enough to give me your attention and you shall hear all about the matter.

"This watch," he said, "had been in my family for three generations before it fell to me. Its

original owner, for whom it was made, was my great-grandfather, Bramwell Olcott Bartine, a wealthy planter of Colonial Virginia, and as stanch a Tory as ever lay awake nights contriving new kinds of maledictions for the head of Mr. Washington, and new methods of aiding and abetting good King George. One day this worthy gentleman had the deep misfortune to perform for his cause a service of capital importance which was not recognized as legitimate by those who suffered its disadvantages. It does not matter what it was, but among its minor consequences was my excellent ancestor's arrest one night in his own house by a party of Mr. Washington's rebels. He was permitted to say farewell to his weeping family, and was then marched away into the darkness which swallowed him up forever. Not the slenderest clew to his fate was found. After the war the most diligent inquiry and the offer of large rewards failed to turn up any of his captors or any fact concerning his disappearance. He had disappeared, and that was all."

SOMETHING IN Bartine's manner that was not in his words—I hardly knew what it was—prompted me to ask:

"What is your view of the matter—of the justice of it?"

"My view of it," he flamed out, bringing his clenched hand down upon the table as if he had been in a public house dicing with blackguards—"my view of it is that it was a characteristically dastardly assassination by that damned traitor, Washington, and his ragamuffin rebels!"

For some minutes nothing was said: Bartine was recovering his temper, and I waited. Then I said:

"Was that all?"

"No—there was something else. A few weeks after my great-grandfather's arrest his watch was found lying on the porch at the front door of his dwelling. It was wrapped in a sheet of letter paper bearing the name of Rupert Bartine, his only son, my grandfather. I am wearing that watch."

Bartine paused. His usually restless black eyes were staring fixedly into the grate, a point of red light in each, reflected from the glowing coals. He seemed to have forgotten me. A sudden threshing of the branches of a tree outside one of the windows, and almost at the same instant a rattle of rain against the glass, recalled him to a sense of his surroundings. A storm had risen, heralded by a single gust of wind, and in a few moments the steadyplash of the

water on the pavement was distinctly heard. I hardly know why I relate this incident; it seemed somehow to have a certain significance and relevancy which I am unable now to discern. It at least added an element of seriousness, almost solemnity. Bartine resumed:

"I have a singular feeling toward this watch—a kind of affection for it; I like to have it about me, though partly from its weight, and partly for a reason I shall now explain, I seldom carry it. The reason is this: Every evening when I have it with me I feel an unaccountable desire to open and consult it, even if I can think of no reason for wishing to know the time. But if I yield to it, the moment my eyes rest upon the dial I am filled with a mysterious apprehension—a sense of imminent calamity. And this is the more insupportable the nearer it is to eleven o'clock—by this watch, no matter what the actual hour may be. After the hands have registered eleven the desire to look is gone; I am entirely indifferent. Then I can consult the thing as often as I like, with no more emotion than you feel in looking at your own. Naturally I have trained myself not to look at that watch in the evening before eleven; nothing could induce me. Your insistence this evening upset me a trifle. I felt very much as I

suppose an opium-eater might feel if his yearning for his special and particular kind of hell were reinforced by opportunity and advice.

"Now that is my story, and I have told it in the interest of your trumpery science; but if on any evening hereafter you observe me wearing this damnable watch, and you have the thoughtfulness to ask me the hour, I shall beg leave to put you to the inconvenience of being knocked down."

HIS HUMOR did not amuse me. I could see that in relating his delusion he was again somewhat disturbed. His concluding smile was positively ghastly, and his eyes had resumed something more than their old restlessness; they shifted hither and thither about the room with apparent aimlessness and I fancied had taken on a wild expression, such as is sometimes observed in cases of dementia. Perhaps this was my own imagination, but at any rate I was now persuaded that my friend was afflicted with a singular and interesting monomania. Without, I trust, any abatement of my affectionate solicitude for him as a friend, I began to regard him as a patient, rich in possibilities of profitable study. Why not? Had he not described his delusion in the interest of science? Ah, poor fellow,

he was doing more for science than he knew: not only his story but himself was in evidence. I should cure him if I could, of course, but first I should make a little experiment in psychology — nay, the experiment itself might be a step in his restoration.

"That is very frank and friendly of you, Bartine," I said cordially, "and I'm rather proud of your confidence. It is all very odd, certainly. Do you mind showing me the watch?"

He detached it from his waist-coat, chain and all, and passed it to me without a word. The case was of gold, very thick and strong, and singularly engraved. After closely examining the dial and observing that it was nearly twelve o'clock, I opened it at the back and was interested to observe an inner case of ivory, upon which was painted a miniature portrait in that exquisite and delicate manner which was in vogue during the eighteenth century.

"Why, bless my soul!" I exclaimed, feeling a sharp artistic delight — "how under the sun did you get that done? I thought miniature painting on ivory was a lost art."

"That," he replied, gravely smiling, "is not I; it is my excellent great-grandfather, the late Bramwell Olcott Bartine, Esquire, of Vir-

**Tales of
Wonder
Old And New**

**THE PYGMY
PLANET**

by
Jack Williamson

**THE CITY
OF SLEEP**

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Laurence Manning

PLANE PEOPLE

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Wallace West

ECHO

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William F. Temple

don't miss issue #5

**FAMOUS
SCIENCE FICTION**

ginia. He was younger then than later—about my age, in fact. It is said to resemble me; do you think so?"

"Resemble you? I should say so! Barring the costume, which I supposed you to have assumed out of compliment to the art—or for *vraisemblance*, so to say—and the no mustache, that portrait is you in every feature, line, and expression."

No more was said at that time. Bartine took a book from the table and began reading. I heard outside the incessantplash of the rain in the street. There were occasional hurried footfalls on the sidewalks; and once a slower, heavier tread seemed to cease at my door—a policeman, I thought, seeking shelter in the doorway. The boughs of the trees tapped significantly on the window panes, as if asking for admittance. I remember it all through these years and years of a wiser, graver life.

Seeing myself unobserved, I took the old-fashioned key that dangled from the chain and quickly turned back the hands of the watch a full hour; then, closing the case, I handed Bartine his property and saw him replace it on his person.

"I think you said," I began, with assumed carelessness, "that

after eleven the sight of the dial no longer affects you. As it is now nearly twelve"—looking at my own timepiece—"perhaps, if you don't resent my pursuit of proof, you will look at it now."

He smiled good-humoredly, pulled out the watch again, opened it, and instantly sprang to his feet with a cry that Heaven has not had the mercy to permit me to forget! His eyes, their blackness strikingly intensified by the pallor of his face, were fixed upon the watch, which he clutched in both hands. For some time he remained in that attitude without uttering another sound; then, in a voice that I should not have recognized as his, he said:

"Damn you! it is two minutes to eleven!"

I was not unprepared for some such outbreak, and without rising repleid, calmly enough:

"I beg your pardon; I must have misread your watch in setting my own by it."

He shut the case with a sharp snap and put the watch in his pocket. He looked at me and made an attempt to smile, but his lower lip quivered and he seemed unable to close his mouth. His hands, also, were shaking, and he thrust them, clenched, into the pockets of his sack-coat. The courageous spirit was manifestly endeavoring to sub-

due the coward body. The effort was too great; he began to sway from side to side, as from vertigo, and before I could spring from my chair to support him his knees gave way and he pitched awkwardly forward and fell upon his face. I sprang to assist him to rise; but when John Bartine rises we shall all rise.

The *post-mortem* examination disclosed nothing; every organ was normal and sound. But when the body had been prepared for burial a faint dark circle was seen to have developed around the neck; at least I was so assured by several persons who said they saw it, but of my own knowledge, I cannot say if that was true.

Nor can I set limitations to the

law of heredity. I do not know that in the spiritual world a sentiment or emotion may not survive the heart that held it, and seek expression in a kindred life, ages removed. Surely, if I were to guess at the fate of Bramwell Olcott Bartine, I should guess that he was hanged at eleven o'clock in the evening, and that he had been allowed several hours in which to prepare for the change.

As to John Bartine, my friend, my patient for five minutes, and — Heaven forgive me! — my victim for eternity, there is no more to say. He is buried, and his watch with him — I saw to that. May God rest his soul in Paradise, and the soul of his Virginian ancestor, if, indeed, they are two souls.

The Reckoning

The first ballot put Anna Hunger's story in top positions; the second brought about a tie between Arthur J. Burks and Seabury Quinn. The third brought Jules de Grandin into undisputed first place. Here is how it all came out finally:

(1) *The Druid's Shadow*, Seabury Quinn; (2) *My Lady of the Tunnel*, Arthur J. Burks; (3) *The Dark Castle*, Marion Brandon tied with *Death from Within*, Sterling S. Cramer; (4) *Dona Diabla*, Anna Hunger; (5) *The Glass Floor*, Stephen King (6) *A Vision* (verse), Robert E. Howard; (7) *Aim For Perfection*, Beverly Haaf.

The Pet Of Mrs. Lilith

by Robert Barbour Johnson

IT WAS AN extraordinary event that occurred at Lake Lodge in the Tahoe region, on July 12th that year. When one of the West's most prominent vacation resorts is in a state of complete panic for twenty-four hours; when a majority of its employees walk out in a body afterward, and at least a

third of its best-paying guests cancel reservations and follow them — it is certainly obvious that something of a most unusual nature must have taken place. The wild rumors spread about the entire area for weeks thereafter, reaching as far as Reno.

But even had the full facts been

The beautiful guest's sudden death was strange — but that was just the beginning of the mystery.

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ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON'S macabre tale, *The Life-After-Death of Mr. Thaddeus Warde*, ran in the November 1963 issue of *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*, and has since seen anthologization twice. Oldtime readers of *WEIRD TALES* will recall such stories as *Mice*, *The Silver Coffin*, *They*, and *Far Below*—the latter of which appeared in a science fiction anthology. The present story was published under the title, *The Strange Case of Monica Lilith*, but in offering us reprint facilities, Mr. Johnson pleaded that we use his original title—one which, after reading the story, we agreed was more suitable.

known, it is doubtful whether they would have been accepted, in this day and age. For what occurred, on that placid July day was simply unbelievable, by modern standards! For it seemed to hint unpleasantly at the possibility of truth in certain beliefs and superstitions that have long been discarded by our scientific era; that are regarded only as quaint and fantastic delusions of forgotten Middle Ages. Yet the singular business of Mrs. Lilith, at Lake Tahoe, in the ultra-modern and streamlined year of our Lord, 1953, seems to be explainable only as witchcraft!

Not, let it be hastily added, that there was anything whatever 'witchlike' about the lady in ques-

tion! Anyone further from the conventional old crone of folklore would be hard to imagine. Monica Lilith was a beautiful, wealthy and singularly attractive young woman; no more than in her early thirties. She did her flying about, not on a broomstick, but in a low-slung Jaguar roadster with leopard skin upholstery; and the only spells she was known to cast were on susceptible males! As for being wicked—well, that word is rather outmoded, nowadays. The modern term is "glamorous." Mrs. Lilith certainly was that. But there was nothing sinister about her personality; and as regards the supernatural, none of her friends and associates dreamed that she could even spell it! Except for that extraordinary name, there was absolutely nothing to set her apart from the rest of the wealthy and carefree set that gather each year to drink, dance and gamble away the summer at one of the West's most famous resort-hotels.

You know Lake Lodge, of course, if you know the Tahoe country at all. Not even 'Cal-Neva' is more famous. Its enormous log bulk, topped by that curious and distinctive cupola, is on all the postcards, and dominates the entire Nevada side of the Lake itself. But though you've certainly

seen the place, or pictures of it; you've probably never been inside it. The average tourist, in his jalopy, does not drive up to its stately portals for a week-end's lodging, as he does to other resorts and motels in the area. Reservations at the Lodge must be made at least six months in advance. And one could easily rent the "Presidential suite" of the largest San Francisco hotel for less than one of its not particularly modern or elaborate rooms would cost him.

Built in the '90's, it is all under one roof; though a few small guest cottages have been added recently, as a concession. Its architecture is "rustic", though only if it is assumed that our pioneer ancestors built their log cabins on the scale of the Pyramid of Cheops! The building is at least a city block in length, and three stories high; the third floor being the most expensive, and desirable. Though its exterior and verandas are of log-sheathing; inside it contains elevators, neon, chrome and all the trappings of a first-class hostelry. It has its own private beach, with pliers for speedboats and launches, its own gambling casino, its own ballroom, with 'name bands' imported from Reno; and, of course, that famous dining room with live

redwoods growing in it, and a troutstream running through, from which ambitious guests can catch fish for their own breakfasts.

In short, it is quite an establishment! Cuisine, standards and service are all on a par with big-city hotels, in the heart of rusticity. A staff of approximately a hundred, mostly college students working for vacations, ministers to the comfort of its patrons. It even has its own resident physician, Doctor Hugo Gresham; once a prominent Reno surgeon, but with a slight penchant for the bottle, who finds the gay life of the resort more congenial than private practice. He is always available to minister to such ailments as the expensive clientele may have, or think they have.

They are a curious lot, the resort "regulars." They come from all over America, and even foreign countries; many of them are famous, and all of them rich. Their general average is surprisingly youthful; since the tone of the place is a bit too lively to be congenial to oldsters. There is an atmosphere of gaiety and pleasure seeking, of gambling and recklessness, unusual even in far from conservative Nevada! There have been scandals, suicides, even one or two murders. But the super-expensiveness of the Lodge man-

ages to cloak all in respectability . . .

IN THIS small, gay and cosmopolitan world, Monica Lilith held high place. For the last three summers she had been there, occupying an entire suite on that exclusive third floor. She was universally known and well-liked; though not even her enemies knew too much about her, or where she came from. The Lodge was apparently her only home; one gathered that she spent her winters in travel, mostly in obscure parts of Europe. She always spoke of herself as an American; but there was an occasional trace of accent in her strangely sweet voice, and a slight dark overcast to her exquisite skin, that seemed to hint of origins outside our shores. In a community made up so largely of divorcees, she passed as one; though it was by no means certain that she had ever been married, or that there had ever been a 'Mr. Lilith' at all. But she was undoubtedly single, now. Though her life was more or less a constant procession of men, none of them ever lingered long enough to consider himself in any way important!

She seemed to have no other purpose in life but to enjoy herself; and she certainly seemed to

have all the facilities to do it with, both physical and financial. The source of her wealth was as mysterious as her background. Certainly it did not come from her male friends; she was almost unique, in that environment, in her complete disdain for "gold-digging." Yet she had been known to drop as much as five thousand at a single evening's baccarat at the Lodge Casino without turning a blonde hair!

As for the physical charms, they were much in evidence, too: though perhaps not quite so much as might have been expected. In a climate which seems to inspire its feminine personnel to try to "outstrip" each other constantly, down to the last ultimate Bikini, Mrs. Lilith was oddly on the conservative side! Her dinner gowns, though all exclusive Parisian creations, were curiously enveloping on their upper portions; so that no one had ever seen her shoulders and upper arms exposed. And though her playsuits revealed the usual (and, indeed, often unusual!) expanses of nether limbs, she always seemed to wear jackets or sweaters with them even on the hottest days. As for bathing suits, she never wore them; since she could not be induced to swim and seemed, indeed, to fear the water. Though she spent much of

her time in sunbathing on the beach, beside the lake, she seldom ventured out on its placid blue expanse even in canoes or sail-boats.

THERE WERE other eccentricities, too. Despite her visible wealth, she had no personal maid; and assumed the complete care of her belongings, and rooms, entirely by herself. Chambermaids and charwomen were admitted to the suite only when Mrs. Lilith herself was there, and even then their only duty was to make the beds and change linens. Everything else was always in apple-pie order. Exactly how she accomplished this was baffling; since she was seldom there, day-times; and was definitely not the "housewifely" type! Yet the fact remained; the large suite was always immaculate, without even a speck of dust.

Nor was her aversion to having anyone in her apartment confined to Room Service; it extended also to her friends. She never did any entertaining there, and did nothing to encourage visitors. I do not mean to imply that she always spent her nights alone; the contrary has been stated! Yet none of her lovers was ever able to boast that he had spent a night in Mrs. Lilith's bedroom. Mrs. Lilith always went to his; involving

herself in much difficulty, and even a few small scandals; which need not concern us here. That she was willing to go to such lengths, when all she had to do was leave her door ajar, seemed very odd indeed. It was almost as if the rooms held some secret that she dared not chance anyone seeing.

Yet the only living thing that was there, apart from Mrs. Lilith herself, was the pet animal she always kept with her. And there was no particular secret about this pet; everyone in the hotel knew about it. It arrived with her each June, in a neat traveling case, with open ventilation end; and was carried up by the bellboys, with her other luggage, before the eyes of the entire lobby. The case stood open in a corner of her bedroom, thereafter; and it had the run of the entire apartment during her absences. The resort management ordinarily frowned on pets; but this one had never made any trouble, it had become almost an institution.

Yet though servants and friends alike knew that it was there, and had even caught glimpses of it; none of them had ever seen it at close hand, or had any idea of what it was. It was just something small and whitish, that moved quickly, with a sort of hopping motion. It was generally as-

suned to be of some rare species; tamed by its owner, but timid with outsiders. It would always withdraw into its leather case when anyone came in, and could not be coaxed forth. "Poor little thing! It's so shy!" Mrs. Lilith would explain. "It loves only me; I just can't get it to have anything to do with other people!" And she cautioned everyone against going too near the case, warning that the creature might attack or bite if it were touched.

But the warning was quite unnecessary, in the majority of cases. For there was something about the thing, small as it was, that seemed to create a disinclination in most people to go near it, or even remain in the same room with it! Perhaps it was its silence; for it never made the slightest sound, never moved or rustled, as animals do in a box. And yet there was the constant feeling that it was there, and watching; you could never forget its presence.

"It frightens me." More than one of Mrs. Lilith's women friends complained, afterward, "It's just not *natural*, somehow! It gives me goosepimples. I can't think how Monica can stand having it around her!"

But there was no question that Mrs. Lilith was devoted to her pet. She always referred to it as "my

beloved", or "my precious one"; she spent long hours closeted with it, and could be heard talking to it, or crooning to it in the dead of night. She assumed full charge of its care, and feeding, herself. There was, indeed, some curiosity as to what she might be feeding it, since she was never seen to carry anything up from the resort dining room, and was never known to purchase packaged or prepared animal foods during her frequent trips to Reno and Carson City. If it could have been ascertained just what the creature ate, it would have been easier to tell what it was . . .

Then came the twelfth of July, and the accident that precipitated such startling consequences.

THE MANNER of it was curious, and requires some explanation. The day was extremely hot, and most of the resort's population was either in the water, or out on it. Even Mrs. Lilith had succumbed with the rest; she had ventured out in one of the Lodge canoes, and was paddling moodily about, some distance from shore. She was wearing a distinctive red sharkskin playsuit (tightly buttoned up, as usual) and was plainly visible from the beach.

Exactly what happened will probably never be known. But sud-

denly there were screams; the canoe was seen to be overturned, and Mrs. Lilith was struggling in the water.

The four extremely able Lake Lodge Life Guards (the two handsomest were rumored to be among those whose rooms she visited) all dived in, instantly, and raced toward the scene; as did approximately a dozen other men, all expert swimmers. Several of her friends who were cruising about in various craft quickly swung them in her direction; and even a small hydroplane swung down on its pontoons. There was a sort of converging on the spot, within two minutes; and it seemed simply impossible that none of them reached her before she went down for the third time. Indeed, she probably had *not* gone down, the body was still floating when the rescuers reached it and lifted it to the deck of a launch. But the lungs were full of water, and there was no trace of pulse.

Artificial respiration, attempted while the boat raced back to shore, was without avail. The expert ministrations of Dr. Hugo Gresham, when the body was carried into his office, likewise proved futile. Mrs. Lilith had drowned, there was no doubt about it. Though how she could have done so without sinking

beneath the waves was quite inexplicable.

The body lay in state for some two hours on Dr. Gresham's examination table, while sorrowing friends filed past, and was then removed to the most expensive undertaking establishment in Reno. The sharkskin playsuit had become disarranged by water, and it was now apparent why Monica Lilith, in life, had never permitted her bare shoulders to be seen. There was a birthmark on one of them; a curious blemish that no amount of powder could have covered up. It was round and puffy, and looked oddly like a third nipple! The Doctor examined it several times, with deep interest.

"Never saw anything like it before, in my life!" he muttered, to the resort Manager. "It's more than just a mark. There's a suggestion of glands, beneath; and a swelling — you'd almost swear the thing was functioning! Extraordinary!" One suspected that he would have liked to dissect it, and was deterred only by the prominence of the victim.

The ambulance arrived at length and the body was taken away. There remained only the matter of winding up Mrs. Lilith's affairs, and of the mysterious pet, now bereft of its owner. It was Doctor Gresham who volunteered

to take charge of the creature for the time being, since none of her friends seemed over-anxious to assume the responsibility. He departed upstairs on the errand. A few minutes later the Manager, now back in his office, had a call from him on the house phone.

"You'd better come up here," he said, in rather a peculiar voice. "There's something odd . . . I need your advice!"

CURSING ALL women and all pets under his breath, the Manager hurried for the elevators. Arriving at the third floor, he found Doctor Gresham standing in the middle of Mrs. Lilith's suite, fingering his graying moustache perplexedly. The animal must have escaped, he declared. There was absolutely nothing alive in the whole place; he'd searched thoroughly. The woman who had the adjoining rooms had told him that she'd heard a series of shrill, piping cries about two hours before; and, shortly afterward, a sound like the opening of a transom. It must have gotten out into the corridor, and was perhaps now roaming the resort, looking for its mistress. Though it seemed too far-fetched to suppose that it could know that something had happened to her . . .

The Manager listened to this

rambling account with impatience. He was a testy little man with gold-rimmed spectacles, whose life was one long series of irritations. "All right! All right!" he broke in, finally. "So it's escaped! Does it matter? The thing's bound to turn up, sooner or later. It can't get out of the building. And even if it does, and escapes into the woods—what then? We've got more important things to worry about than a confounded animal. I'll pass the word along to the staff to be on the lookout for it, if you like. What is it, by the way? If you've examined the case it lived in, you must have formed some idea."

Doctor Gresham looked at him, quizzically. "The case?" he repeated. "H'm, yes. That's another thing I'd like your opinion on. It's in here; have a look at it for yourself, will you?"

He led the way into the bedroom. Fretfully, the Manager followed; and peered into the traveling case, whose top now stood open. Then he said "Good Lord!" and almost dropped his spectacles.

The case was a large one; almost as wide as a suitcase, and rather higher. It contained, not the sawdust and litter of an animal's quarters, but what seemed to be a complete set of doll furniture! The Manager's bewildered

eyes made out a tiny four-poster bed, with sheets; two chairs, a small table, and other objects equally incredible. It looked almost like one of the hotel's rooms, reduced down. There was even a miniature altar at one end, with tiny "birthday" candles, and an exquisitely carven little ivory crucifix. Possibly through the Doctor's handling, the latter had become loosened, and now dangled head downward.

The Manager straightened, after a moment, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. "Well!" he said, a little shakily. "This doesn't tell us much about the animal. But it certainly tells us something about Mrs. Lilith! She was crazy; mad as a March Hare! There's no doubt of it. Imagine furnishing a pet's case, like that. I've heard of doting owners; there was that dame with the perfumed Pekingese, last year. But this—well, it beats the lot! Even a 'prie-dieu'; of all the impossible—I suppose the beast said its prayers, before it! Whew! And to think we had the woman in the Lodge for three whole summers, and never suspected she was mentally off."

Dr. Gresham rubbed his chin, noncommittally. "H'm, possibly," he murmured. "I only hope it's that simple. Still, you'll notice that

the case is immaculately clean, and there's no trace of animal odor. The thing seems to have been an excellent housekeeper! I certainly hope it turns up; I'd like to have a look at whatever sort of animal it is that lives in a furnished room, like a person."

The Manager turned toward the door. "Well," he said, vaguely. "I'll pass the word along to the staff . . ."

THERE WAS little need for that as events turned out. Less than fifteen minutes later there was a disturbance on the floor below. Wild shrieks brought everyone within earshot running; and one of the chambermaids was discovered in a state of almost complete collapse. Dr. Gresham managed to get her away from the crowd and into his office before she could stammer out her full story. But virtually all the employees heard it downstairs, later.

She had, she said, gone to the second floor linen closet to obtain some fresh towels. And, when she opened the door, something had swung out at her off the crossbar inside. She had the vague impression of a shape like a monkey, only smaller, and whitish. It had landed on her shoulder, tiny clawed hands clutched at her throat, and a shrill, venomous piping fill-

ed her ears. She fell back before the onslaught, screaming from fright, and covering her eyes to protect them. When she opened her eyes again, the thing was gone and a crowd of people were surrounding her. But no crowd could make her feel safe; she still trembled and cowered, afraid of every shadow. She insisted that she was leaving immediately, without waiting to collect her belongings or salary; or even allowing the Doctor to treat several small but vicious gashes on her face and neck, one of which had narrowly missed the jugular vein. She was really in no condition to travel. But leave she did, by the next bus. Her departure marked the beginning of the later exodus of Lodge people.

"Well," the Manager declared, later. "It could have been worse! At least we know approximately where the little brute is hiding. And we know what it is. Some sort of marmoset, obviously; from her description."

But Dr. Gresham only shook his grizzled head. "Marmosets are timid little things," he declared. "They don't attack human beings. And they don't have claws, like this thing. There's something wholly unnatural about it. I've a notion we haven't seen the last of it, yet!"

HIS WORDS were prophetic. For within half an hour, he was called on to treat a second victim. This time it was harder to hush up, for it was one of the guests. An elderly dowager, also on the second floor. She had been in the crowd that had gathered about the fallen maid; and had been so upset that she had returned to her rooms, and phoned for stimulants from the Bar downstairs. A few minutes later there had been a tapping on her outer door, and thinking it was the bell-boy, she opened it. Something had flown into her face, from the dim corridor. "Flown" was precisely the word she used; she insisted that there had been a whirring, as of wings. The thing had circled her head, flapping and piping shrilly. She'd slapped at it, slammed the door before it could get in, and then collapsed, like the maid. There were no wounds; but she was completely hysterical, and it took the Doctor some time to calm her and give her a sedative.

He was, in fact, still with her when the third incident occurred. It was on the third floor, this time; and involved a young couple named Simpson. They had just returned from driving to Carson City for the afternoon, and so had missed all the excitement. Going straight up to their suite to change for dinner, they were astonished to

hear sounds of smashing and splintering inside it, as if someone were running amok in there. They flung open the door, expecting to see some human intruder. They were quite unprepared for what actually came out, scuttling between their legs and down the hallway. Mr. Simpson never saw it at all; or had only the vaguest glimpse of something small and pallid. But his wife saw it clearly and was able to describe it to the Manager, when that harrassed official answered her tearful summons. But her description only added to the confusion. For she was under the impression that the creature was some sort of lizard! At least, it ran on its hind legs, and had a body covered with scales, and a thick, dragging reptilian tail.

The room it left behind was a wreck; almost everything breakable in it smashed, and belongings ripped and scattered horribly. The Manager, completely bewildered that one small being could have accomplished so much destruction, could only promise that the resort would pay for everything as soon as soon as the damage could be assessed.

Then he hurried off to direct his hunt, which from then on assumed a rather frantic quality. Confronted by what seemed a

whole Zoo of creatures, all berserk, a small army of searchers had been enrolled. They spread through the whole three floors of Lake Lodge, questing in every nook and corner. And yet it was in the middle of all this that the fourth incident occurred. A fire was discovered in a corridor, blazing merrily!

A pile of chips and rubbish had been heaped clumsily together, and the whole set ablaze. It took only a few seconds work with an extinguisher to put it out and the Manager was inclined to discount it. "Probably only coincidental," he declared. "Animals don't start fires; that's certain!"

But Doctor Gresham only picked up a handful of the chips, indicating their extreme tinyness. "Nobody knows what this damned thing is able to do," he said, grimly. "We've got to catch it; that's all there is to it! It'll have the whole building down about our ears if we don't. It's obviously out to avenge its mistress' death, crazy as that sounds. And as for its powers—well, I'm beginning to believe almost anything . . ."

BY NOW, of course, the whole of Lake Lodge was aware that something serious was amiss. Clusters of guests, routed unceremoniously out of their rooms by

the searchers, gathered in bewildered groups in the downstairs lobby and lounges, speculating in awed tones, and listening to the sounds and babbles of voices that drifted from the upper regions. There was no pretense at serving dinner, the Bar and the Casino remained closed; even the reception desk was temporarily unmanned. Every available male employee had been enrolled in the small army that were spread out all over the huge structure; combing it corridor by corridor, room by room and almost inch by inch. They were armed with sticks, canes, golf clubs, and even a few sporting rifles. The Manager had a revolver, which he flourished; and Doctor Gresham was carrying an old frog gig; a curious affair with three barbed tines and a wooden handle.

For a long time the search went on. But at length most of its participants reached the top floor corridors; and the Doctor leaned on his improvised spear and sighed bewilderedly. "No luck!" he said. "It beats me! We've covered the whole place, from top to bottom; there's nowhere else to look. Unless it's given up, and cleared out altogether—" He broke off, sniffing. "Oh, Lord! I smell smoke again! It seems to be coming from above."

The Manager gasped. "The Cupola! The old ornamental tower on top of the Lodge. It's the only place we haven't looked. There's a trapdoor along here, somewhere." He led the way down the hall, midway, and pointed up. "But nobody's been up there in years. There's no way except by a ladder. The thing can't be in there; it's impossible . . ."

"Oh, is it?" The Doctor chuckled, grimly. Smoke was plainly curling, in little wisps, down around the trapdoor's outline. "Ever hear of rat-tunnels, my dear fellow? This old building is full of 'em. It could get up there, all right. And if it has, we've trapped it. Hurry!"

A STEPLADDER was brought and raised. The Doctor mounted it stiffly, and cautiously raised the creaking old door. There were several outcries as he did so; for it was a little like looking into Hell. A red light danced and flickered, where there should have been darkness; and a gigantic shadow, winged and horned, seemed to tower in menace. It was a moment before they realized that such a shadow could only have been thrown by something quite small on the floor where the fire was.

"Yes, sir. That's our little friend!" the Doctor exulted. "He

can't slip back into his hole in time. Boost me up, somebody."

He squeezed his bulk through the opening and disappeared from their sight. They heard him say "Well, let's have a look at you!" And then, "Good God Almighty!" in tones of utter disbelief and horror.

Ensued then a great trampling and scurrying, shrill piping cries, and then a high shrieking, likethat of a stuck pig, that died away in moans. Finally the Doctor reappeared in the opening and looked down at them. He had the air of a man who has been through some overwhelming experience; his shoulders sagged, and his face was white and drawn. But all he said was, "Some of you better come up and put this fire out. It doesn't amount to much, but it'll need an extinguisher."

There was a rush up the ladder at that. The blaze, which had only caught a couple of rafters, was quickly brought under control; but there was much chopping and squirting of chemical foam. When they'd got it out and looked around, there was nothing else to be seen. Only the broken handle of the old frog-gig lying in a corner, and a few splotches of blackish blood. Then it occurred to the searchers that Doctor Hugo

Gresham was no longer with them. He had climbed down the ladder rather hurriedly, those below reported; and he seemed to be carrying something small under his coat, something that still appeared to be struggling and moaning feebly. Then he had hurried off downstairs. They went in search of him; but he was locked in his office by that time and would not answer even the Manager's knocks. He shouted out that he was making an important dissection, and could not be disturbed . . .

THAT IS REALLY all that is positively known about the strange happenings at Lake Lodge. The rest is only gossip, and speculation. It was started principally by one of the bellboys; not one of the college help but a rather illiterate Nevada youth. He had been poking about the trashbins behind the resort, the following day, and he had come upon certain curious fragments, or remains, that bothered him. The nature of these fragments was utterly anomalous; for not only had they been cut and hacked into incredibly small bits (in such a manner as to suggest that something other than dissection was the motive) but decomposition was curiously far advanced in most of them.

Nothing was identifiable save a

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small fragment of membrane, that looked like part of a bat's wing; a strip of skin about three inches square, covered with overlapping shiny scales, like a fish's; and part of a foreleg, with a hand or paw attached. It was this latter object that frightened the bellboy, and set him to talking wildly to anyone who would listen. For he swore that not only did it look uncannily (despite being covered with scales, and having talons on the tiny fingers) like a human baby's hand, but that the thing was *still spasmodically closing and unclosing as it lay there on the dump!*

And thus came about that exodus of Lake Lodge employees. They seem to have left almost in a body; and been replaced by others brought from long distances away. Since most of the guests who left at the same time have not returned this season, it is virtually a new Lodge that confronts the visitor; one from which the very memory of the whole occurrence has been elaborately erased, as one sponges off a slate . . .

But old Doctor Gresham is still the Lodge physician; and should you ever stay at the place and have occasion to visit his office to be treated for sunburn or some such specious ailment — if so, I suggest that you pay particular attention to

a picture that now hangs in one corner of his office.

It is a reproduction, that the Doctor picked up in an Art store in Reno, of a painting by Hieronimus Boesch, that mad old Dutch master who specialized in depicting the mythical demons of medieval Hells. There are hundreds of them in this picture, of all sizes and shapes, with every confused blending of human and beast and bird and insect and whatnot that the diseased fancies of bygone superstition could invent. Around one of these creatures the Doctor has drawn a circle in red ink. It is the most "plausible" of the lot; almost human in appearance save for its bat-wings, scaled body and reptilian tail, its horned head, and the expression of concentrated malice on its tiny face.

Below it, also in red ink, is scribbled what appears to be a Biblical quotation from the first book of Samuel. "*And his servants saith unto Saul: 'Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar, at En-dor.'*"

But that there is any connection between this and a certain Mrs. Monica Lilith at Lake Tahoe, in that year of Eisenhower, television sets and three-dimensional movies — I, of course, should not care to put myself on record as even hinting !

The Man Who Chained The Lightning

by *Paul Ernst*

(author of *Doctor Satan*)

THE WIND played an eery chorus among the dank leaves of the trees lining the wealthy residential street. Far off, the flickering

of lightning split the black September night in 193—.

From behind the high wall bordering the Weldman estate

And the soft voice on the telephone said, "Ascott Keane, you have been meddling again . . . "

In 1935, Farnsworth Wright, editor of *WEIRD TALES*, was feeling the competition of such titles as *TERROR TALES* and *HORROR STORIES*, which had begun to sprout the year before. These publications were devoted to the sex-sadism mystery or detective story, and while the outer furniture of weird tales was usually on the set, in most of the stories there were no "supernatural" explanations at all. The lovely, bosomy girls were stripped and tortured as fully as could be set forth in print for newsstand distribution at the time—and the illustrations went as far in depicting such scenes as could be gotten away with; and that, really, was what these magazines were about, although you would find an occasional genuine weird tale among the short stories. Wright felt that he had to do something to indicate that *WEIRD TALES* also offered eerie mystery, and started to run more earthy-type covers, and more mundane "horror" mystery stories.

To the unliterary person, the sadistic type of mystery or detective story is something that could "really happen", no matter how improbable—and we must remember that this sort of thing was indeed happening in various parts of Europe. In addition to stirring unconscious sexual desires, these stories satisfied the unliter-

ary person's desires for sensational action, direct presentation, and the feeling that it's almost like something you might read in the newspaper. The literary sort of weird tale is just "fantastic" and "impossible" to the unliterary; they want no part of it, and they want no part of writing above the cliche and platitude level. (Not that literary persons cannot enjoy this sort of thing, at times; of course they can; but they are not *confined* to it when it comes to reading fiction.)

What Wright did, in a misguided attempt to attract unliterary readers, was to run a certain percentage of the "realistic" sex-sadism mystery story, looking for some way of combining elements which would draw in the readers of *TERROR TALES*, etc., and still satisfy his regulars. It was this which was behind the "Doctor Satan" series, by PAUL ERNST.

I cannot be certain of it, but I have a very strong feeling that more regulars were offended than new readers attracted; for the elements which were included to satisfy *WEIRD TALES'* regulars were exactly the elements which made the stories unacceptable ("impossible") to the unliterary. By and large, though, this series was the best of such attempts to imitate the competition, and might have appeared in the magazine anyway.

came a hoarse cry. It was not a shout so much as an exclamation; but in it was packed a horror that could not have been more vividly expressed had the person yelled at the top of his voice.

With the low cry, the wind seemed to die down as if to listen. In the lull the slam of a small gate in the high wall rang out.

A man sped through that gate. His face was white in the light of the street lamp fifty yards away. His eyes were wide and staring. His mouth was half open and twisted as if for another cry.

He began to run down the street toward the town section. He pounded through puddles and mud, with his head straining forward and his breath tearing in sobs from his throat. He was slight, bald, middle-aged, and fear lent such speed to his feet that he ran as a youth might run. But only for an instant did he speed through the night.

The end of the Weldman wall was still a hundred feet in front of him, when suddenly he stopped. This time a piercing scream echoed down the midnight quiet of the street like a banshee wail.

The man began to dance, as if grotesque, horrible music sounded from somewhere near. And as his feet beat clumsily on the muddy sidewalk, he struck himself with his clenched fists. Against his chest his fists beat, and then against his

throat, as though he had gone mad and was attempting to punish himself for some recent transgression.

His screams ripped out in an almost unbroken flow of sound while he struck at his throat and chest. But only for a few moments did he dance there, and swing his arms. Abruptly his screaming stopped, as though cut across the middle with a knife-blade. His arms ceased to move.

He stood in the center of the sidewalk, staring up beyond the end of the Weldman wall. A patrolman was running toward him, drawn by the frightful screams; but the man did not seem to see him. He simply stood there, silent now and motionless, as if turned to rock. And then, with the policeman still a dozen yards away, he fell.

Full length to the sidewalk his body crashed, stiffly, like a thing of wood rather than of yielding flesh. And like a rigid thing of wood he lay in the water and mud of the walk.

The patrolman reached his side and bent over him.

Glaring, sightless eyes turned up into his face. The man's lips moved stiffly.

"What?" said the policeman, raising the man's head. "What's that you said?"

The middle-aged man's voice

sounded again, muffled and thick:
" . . . master . . . shaving . . . "

The patrolman almost shook him in his anxiety to hear what was wrong.

"What is it?" he snapped. "Are you sick? Have you been hurt? What's happened?"

But the man said no more. His face was blackening and swelling. His lips were parting over bared teeth, while between them his breath rattled with ever more difficulty and agony.

Then the agonized breathing stopped. The man's eyeballs rolled up so that only the whites were visible. And the patrolman lowered him to the sidewalk and blew his whistle.

The man was dead.

Instinctively the policeman crossed himself as he stood looking down at the body.

A SQUAD CAR screamed to a stop beside the dead man and the cop. A detective jumped out from beside the driver and ran forward. One look he took at the dead, blackened face, then he shook his head and whistled.

"Weldman's valet! He was on his way to the station house to tell us something. I was standing near when the desk sergeant took the call. Something terrible, and too important to be told over the phone, the guy said. Something about his employer, John Weld-

man. Some danger hanging over him, I gathered."

He stared at the agonized dead face.

"Well, whatever it was he was going to tell us will never be known now. But it must have been something big—for him to have been knocked off like this to keep him from spilling it!"

"Hey, he wasn't knocked off," said the policeman. "I saw him keel over. There wasn't anybody else in sight."

The detective stared somberly at him.

"It doesn't matter whether anyone was in sight or not. This guy was murdered!" He touched the curiously rigid body with the toe of his shoe. "If only he'd said something before he died . . .

"He did," said the policeman.

"What?" The plainclothesman's hand shot out and clutched the cop's shoulder. "What did he say?"

"Just three words. And they don't seem to make sense at all. He said 'master . . . millions . . . shaving . . .'"

The detective relaxed his tense grip.

"'Master. Millions. Shaving.' That doesn't mean anything to me. I guess the valet's secret died with him."

But the detective spoke too soon.

So far as the police force went,

the dead man's secret might have died when he did. And the three words muttered by the dying lips might never be made clear to them.

But the night was alive with an intelligence far beyond theirs; an intelligence which was aware of things reaching back beyond this death of a servant, and which was already moving ahead of the death toward the apprehension of the cause.

Across the street from the two men who bent over a blackened corpse was an unusually large tree. In the branches of the tree a shapeless shadow clung.

The black figure slowly and silently descended while the plainclothes man and the patrolman waited for the coroner and the ambulance. Under his arm was what appeared to be a small square box.

The figure got to the sidewalk, faced the men unseen for a moment, then moved silently off into the night.

FROM A SQUARE black box in a pitchdark room came a beam of light, spreading from a half-inch opening to cover a six-foot-square silver screen. On the screen showed a high whitewall—the wall of the Weldman estate.

In the blank white wall could be seen a dim oblong which was a small gate. The gate opened sud-

denly and a man leaped forth. Even in miniature, on the screen, his face could be read: an expression of stark terror was on it, twisting the partly opened mouth and glinting from the wide eyes.

Faithfully the movements of Weldman's valet were reproduced on the screen. Slight, bald, middle-aged, he ran through the night along the white wall. Then the picture showed him stopping and beginning his clumsy, inexplicable dance, and beating insanely at his own neck and chest.

But the picture revealed something more—something which made the halt and the self-punishment only too logical!

Just before the man stopped, something moved at the top of the high wall ahead of him. The something was a hand. The hand curved out over the wall with fingers contracted as if to pluck something. But the hand did not gather anything in. Instead, it released an object—a tiny object which did not show in the rather dim moving-picture until it had hit the unfortunate valet. Then it showed on the whiteness of the valet's throat.

It was a tiny blur, too small to be described by the camera lens. But it moved.

In the picture it showed for just an instant on the running man's throat, and then disappeared under his collar. It was just after that that the man stopped and began beating himself.

"An insect," a deep, brooding voice split the blackness of the room. "A poisonous insect! Carried into the Weldman home, no doubt, for the death of the valet there. But the man had left the house on his way to the police station. He nearly escaped..."

The picture went on, showing the valet's sudden immobility, showing him fall and lie like a log in the mud.

Then—it showed something else, at the top of the wall where the hand had appeared.

The hand was withdrawn now, and a face looked over. It was turned toward the dying man and it was a face to haunt the soul in nightmares.

There were no features to it. Only a blank expanse showed from forehead to chin, with black holes for eyes. A face masked as though for a masquerade; but there was in the masquerade no suggestion of humor.

Over the masked, terrible face was a low-brimmed black hat, and the top of the shoulders showing over the wall also showed black; some sort of cloak.

Evil emanated from the masked face as, like the covered face of a ghoul, it bent over the top of the wall toward where the valet lay dying. Calmly, terribly, it watched the man twitch and lie still. Then, leisurely, indifferently, it disappeared.

"Doctor Satan . . ." a girl's half-stifled cry sounded in the darkened room.

There was no reply to the exclama-

mation. The picture continued, revealing the movement of the man's numbing lips.

A hand slowed the projector. The picture, running at a slower tempo, showed the formed words on the man's lips: ". . . master . . . millions . . . shaving . . ."

Then the lips stopped moving and the figure of the patrolman edged into the film. The projector stopped. There was a click, and light flooded the room.

2

IT WAS A huge room, a library, with books running from floor to ceiling of all four walls, crowding windows and the one door of the chamber. The books were all volumes of learning—a library such as few universities have, and containing some yellowed tomes dealing with the occult which no universities would have permitted on their shelves even had they the wealth with which to purchase them.

In the center of the library was a great ebony desk. Standing beside this was a girl, lovely, tall, lithe, with dark blue eyes and hair more red than brown. The sudden light revealed in her dark eyes, as they rested on a man next to her, a look of perplexity, vague horror, and something soft and glowing and shy, which faded the instant the man's gaze answered hers.

The man was one who had

brought a glow to many a woman's eyes. For this was Ascott Keane, interesting to the mercenary for his large fortune, and to the unmercenary for his looks. His face, under coal-black hair, with steely gray eyes shaded by black eyebrows, had been reproduced in many a rotogravure section. To readers of those society sections he was a wealthy young man who idled when he was not playing games, a fellow without a serious thought in his head. But the girl beside him, Beatrice Dale, his more-than-secretary, knew better.

She knew that Ascott Keane's playboy character was a cloak under which was a grim seriousness of purpose. She knew that he was one of the world's most learned men in all the sciences—and in those deep arts known, for want of a better name, as Black Magic. She knew that he had devoted his life to the running-down of such super-criminals as could laugh at the police and rise to the rather lofty altitude of his own attention.

And she knew that the masked, terrible face that had peered over the top of Weldman's wall for an instant belonged to a criminal who was perhaps, more than worthy of his attention. A man known only as Doctor Satan, from the Luciferian costume he chose to wear when engaged in his fiend's work. A man of great wealth, who had turned to crime to stir his jaded pulses. A man whose name and identity were unknown, but

whose erudition, particularly in forbidden fields of learning, matched Keane's own.

That was the veiled personality which occupied Keane day and night now, to his own great danger. That was the devil who had killed the valet with a poison insect—and who had done other things in the last few weeks at which Keane, till now, had been able only to guess.

The telephone on the ebony desk buzzed softly. Keane picked it up.

A soft voice sounded. "Ascott Keane, you are meddling again!"

Beatrice Dale heard the voice as well as Keane. "Doctor Satan!"

Keane's eyes glittered. He dropped the instrument as if it had turned into a serpent in his fingers.

"I've told you death would strike if you interfered with my plans again," the soft voice continued, sounding from the floor where the phone lay. "And I always keep my promises . . ."

The words ended, swiftly and dramatically. With their ending, the telephone on the floor jumped like a live thing, while from transmitter to receiver, in a thick blue arc, crackled a stream of electricity that would have killed a dozen men.

The crackling arc streamed just as far lightning flickered in the skies south of New York, and died as the lightning died.

Keane stared at Beatrice, who had gone white as death.

"He can harness the lightning!"

he breathed. "That I cannot do myself! If I can't stop him soon, God knows what will happen to this city—to the whole country . . ."

He stared at the instrument. The metal was half melted. The hard rubber had been utterly consumed. Then he shrugged and turned toward the screen again, where, dimmed now by the lights in the room but still showing, was the picture of the dying valet, showing motionless with the stoppage of the projector.

"But I *will* stop him!" Keane's voice came bleakly. "Doctor Satan, hear that, wherever you are now."

He stepped across the melted telephone with a gesture that brushed into a past of forgotten dangers the fate he had just narrowly escaped, and stared at the lips of the pictured man.

"Shaving," he repeated, while Beatrice gazed at him with the fear in her dark blue eyes almost buried by that soft glow which she never, never allowed him to see. "Shaving. I think in that word lies the key to the problem we've been working on for the last few weeks. The problem ending with the death of Weldman's valet.

SWIFTLY KEANE reviewed the problem, one which he alone had become aware of; a string of events which singly had been noted by several people but which in their entirety had been remarked on by no one.

One by one over the past two weeks four wealthy men in New York

had done odd things. Each had disappeared from his office without warning, in three cases breaking important business appointments. Each had then been seen neither at home nor in any accustomed haunt for many hours. Following that, on his return, each had seemed to avoid both his home and his office, appearing only now and then at either place and letting his business take care of itself.

Each, in those two weeks, had personally drawn large sums in cash from the United Continental Bank of New York—always that bank, never any of the others in which they kept money. Each of the four was living alone in his great home with only the servants, his family happening to be away at the time. And each, in the few times he was in home or office, did odd things which seemed to indicate a suddenly faulty memory.

These things Ascott Keane, alone in the city, had noted and pieced together into a pattern he felt sure had sinister meaning. More, it was a pattern behind which he thought he could sense the figure of Doctor Satan in his red robe, with red rubber gloves hiding his hands, and red mask and cap hiding face and hair.

John Weldman, copper magnate, had been the last to go through the queer antics. So to the wall outside Weldman's estate Ascott Keane had taken his special moving-picture camera, which recorded movement in dark night by means of an infra-red

ray attachment he had invented.

And the camera had recorded the death of Weldman's valet—which Keane had been too far away to prevent—and the movement of his dying lips: ". . . master . . . millions . . . shaving . . ."

Beatrice peered into Keane's steely gray eyes. "What does it mean?" she whispered. "Do you know yet, Ascott?"

"I think I do," said Keane slowly. "I—think—I—do!"

THE FLICKERING lightning to the south of New York lit with its rays a small graveyard in the heart of the downtown section of the city. It was a curious little cemetery, less than a hundred years square. Long unused, it was dotted with crumbling tombstones over which long grass grew.

On two sides of it a great factory, built in an L-shape, made a pitch-dark, five-story wall. On the third side an old apartment reared its height. On the fourth side, the street side, a high, rusty iron fence closed it off.

A curious, forgotten place of death in the heart of New York, encroached on by the factory and the apartment building. But more curious yet was a figure which furtively approached the rusted gate in the fence and paused a moment to make sure no person was near.

The figure was tall and gaunt. A low-brimmed black hat hid its head

and most of its face. The rest of the face showed masked—a blank expanse covered by red fabric. A long black cloak covered the figure from neck to ankles, making it blend into the darkness.

The gate creaked open and the figure glided in among the moldering tombstones.

Beside one which lay prone in the rank grass, the figure stopped. Then it stepped on the six-foot slab—and the slab sank under it. A yawning hole appeared where the slab had been; a dark pit into which the figure disappeared.

After an instant the slab rose and settled into place, apparently as it was before, looking as though it had lain there solid and undisturbed for a dozen years.

Under it the black-cloaked figure went down a passage that slanted yet lower into the earth. The passage was lined with broken rock, and through the cracks occasional bits of rotted wood projected. They were remnants of ancient coffins, and with them now and then could be seen bleached white fragments. Bones.

The figure opened a door at the end of the passage and stepped into a chamber as bizarre as it was secret.

It was a cavernous room twenty feet square, lined with the broken rock as was the passage. It was very dim, with a small red lamp in the corner near the door as its only illumination. Along the far wall were cages, small, about the size of large

dog-houses. In these cages four white figures squatted like animals. In the dim light their species could not be determined. They were simply whitish, distorted-looking beasts which seemed too large for their small cages.

Leaning against the wall near the light were four figures that looked at first like sleeping men. But a glance told that they could not be that. Fully clad in expensive clothes, they leaned there like sticks, without flexibility or movement, more like dolls than men, perfectly fashioned in the images of Man but seeming to want motive power and direction.

In the center of the room, drawing themselves to attention as the black-cloaked figure entered the weird chamber, were two creatures that would bring a chill to the spine of any man.

One was an alert, agile little man with pale eyes shining through a mat of hair over his face. And this one, apelike in movement and thought, was Girse, Doctor Satan's faithful servant. The other was a giant with no legs, who supported his hugely muscled torso on his hands, swinging it along on his knuckles as he moved. This was Bostiff, the second of Doctor Satan's servants.

The figure that had entered the room stood straight. Its shoulders moved, and the black cloak dropped. With a sweep of a hand, the black hat was removed. A red robe sheathed body and limbs. Red rubber gloves were over its hands. The face was masked in red, and the head was

covered with a red skullcap so that even its hair did not show. From the skullcap, in mocking imitation of Satan's horns, two small red knobs projected. Lucifer! Someone going robed as Satan to a costume ball! But instinct whispered that this was no mere costume, that the man under the makeup was as malevolent as his garb was mocking.

"Master!" breathed Girse. "Doctor Satan!"

Bostiff scraped his calloused knuckles along the floor uneasily and stared at Doctor Satan out of stupid, dull eyes.

DOCTOR SATAN glanced at the cages in which were dimly to be seen the curious, whitish animals. "Have they been fed?" he asked, his voice soft, almost gentle.

"They have been fed," replied Girse.

"They have given no trouble?"

"None, Master," said Bostiff, grinning significantly.

A feeble groan sounded from one of the cages.

"One is ill?" asked Doctor Satan.

"One is near death," retorted Bostiff. "The cold down here . . ."

"No matter. All have their duplicates, so that any may die without hurting my plans. Any save the last to come here. And I intend to remedy that now . . ."

The voice of Doctor Satan was drowned by a shriek from the cage

in which the groan had sounded a moment before. The strange white animal in it suddenly reared up, or tried to, beating its head against the top of the cage. It rattled the bars for an instant, and then fell.

There was deathly silence in the chamber under the graveyard. Then Doctor Satan strode to the cage.

"Dead," he said, indifferently.

At the word, the other three animals in the adjoining cages set up a wailing and howling, chattering noises that sounded oddly like words.

"Silence!" said Doctor Satan, little above a whisper, yet a whisper that penetrated. The chattering ceased. "Bostiff."

The legless giant hitched his torso toward the cage.

"Take this one into the next chamber." Doctor Satan's red-gloved hand went under his robe. It came out with an odd thing like a crystal tube an inch in diameter and nearly a foot long. "Place this against the body, with the free end slanting toward the south where the lightning still plays."

Bostiff visibly pales.

"But that draws the lightning in here, Master. The walls and roof will collapse . . ."

"Do as I bid you! The walls and roof are safe. But the fires of heaven will consume that carcass, and so we are rid of it."

Bostiff grunted and nodded his great head. He opened the cage in which the white beast had fallen, and

dragged it out. But now as the carcass was drawn nearer the light, it could be seen that it was not a beast at all. It was a man, elderly, naked, hideously scarred and emaciated. And so the other three left alive in their cages were men, penned up like animals in spaces too small to allow them to lie or stand at full length. Dumbly, cowering behind their bars, they watched the red-robed fiendish figure.

Doctor Satan went to a chest as Bostiff dragged the dead man through a door leading to another underground room like the first. He took from the chest a small object looking prosaic in this dimly lit chamber. It was a checkbook, on the United Continental Bank of New York City.

Doctor Satan walked with the checkbook to the end cage. He handed it, and a pen, to the shadowy white figure within.

"Make out five checks," he commanded. "Three for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars apiece, two for a hundred thousand."

The cowering figure in the cage straightened a little, and refused to take book and pen through the bars.

"Bostiff," called Doctor Satan. His voice still soft, soft, but there was in it an essence that made Girse shiver.

The legless giant came from the next chamber, leaving the door open. The doorway was suddenly flooded

with light that beat at the eyeballs like whips. Through the portal could be seen the dead man who had been taken out of the cage. But when the flash was over, only charred remnants of the corpse were left. That was all. The crystalline rod in their midst waited to bring the next lightning flicker from the south to consume even the remnants.

"Yes, Master?" said Bostiff, dragging his great body forward.

"This man does not want to do as he is ordered. You will kindly reason with him."

"I'll write them!" screamed the man suddenly. "My God, don't let that legless fiend get me—I'll write them!"

Doctor Satan's red mask moved slightly, as though beneath it his lips shaped themselves to a smile. He handed pen and book through the bars to the naked creature in the cage.

3

IN THE MORNING, which was flooded with calm sunlight after the night's storm, Ascott Keane paused a moment before the impressive stone facade of the United Continental Bank.

The bank building looked like a fortress, with thick walls and bronze doors that could have withstood an army. It spoke of comfortable, prosaic wealth, and the power to hold it indefinitely from marauders. It spoke

of a world of skyscrapers and giant industrial plants and motor cars.

It seemed to give the lie to the possibility of the existence anywhere of a person capable of looting it—a person like Doctor Satan who could laugh ironically at bronze doors and stone walls.

Keane passed through the guarded entrance of the bank, and went to the rear of the great room within, past marble and glass counters, cages in which shelves of money changed hands, and desks at which transactions involving millions were being accomplished.

At the rear was a private elevator which went up to a big office on the fourth floor of the building. The office was marked, President.

Keane's name gave him instant entree to the president of the bank. For Keane was known to this man not only as a wealthy citizen whose business would be useful, but also in his more secret role of marvelously capable criminal investigator.

"Keane!" said Mercer, the president. "It's good to see you. What brings you here?" He glanced at the electric clock on his desk. "Only nine-thirty in the morning! That's practically dawn for you. At least that's what you like to let people think."

Keane did not smile in return. He studied the man.

Mercer was a small man, lean and leathery, with prim nose-glasses like a school teacher. One might be tempted to dismiss him as prim and

fussy—till the jaw was noted. Mercer had a jaw like a steel trap, and blue eyes that were shrewd, capable, and honest-looking.

"I'm here to ask about a few of your customers," he said.

"I think I know which ones," said Mercer, the smile fading from his leathery face. "Sit down and tell me about it."

Keane took a chair at the end of Mercer's desk. It was an enormous desk. On it there was no welter of papers; it was bare save for a large onyx electric clock which was at the back and end of the desk between Mercer and whoever sat in the visitor's chair.

The men I wanted to talk to you about," Keane said, "are Edward Dombey, Harold Kragness, Shepherd Case and lastly, John Weldman, all rich, and all depositors here."

Mercer leaned back in his chair, putting the tips of his fingers together and saying nothing, letting Keane talk before he told what he himself knew.

"I've learned," Keane went on, "that all four of these men have been making heavy withdrawals of cash here lately. For some reason each of them has found it necessary to have hundreds of thousands of dollars in bills with him. Yet here's an odd thing.

"Each of the four has deposits in other large New York banks. Between the four of them, indeed, they have large sums in no less than six

of the biggest banks in the city. Yet they always have come here to draw their cash."

Mercer stirred. "I didn't know that," he said thoughtfully.

"Well, it's true. So I came here to see if I could find out why. And I think I have." Keane glanced at the onyx electric clock. "That is, I believe I have—if the checks happened to be made out in this office."

Mercer nodded. "They were. All of them."

"All right, tell me about them," said Keane, leaning back to listen in his turn.

Mercer cleared his throat.

"Those are the four men, and that's the business, I expected you to ask about when the girl announced your name," he said. "Because there's something damned queer about it, although I haven't been able to puzzle out what it is."

"It started two weeks ago. Harold Kragness came up here. He talked pleasantly enough with me for a moment or two and then said he wanted to cash a rather large check. A hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. He thought I'd better put my initials on it so the teller would pay the money without question.

"That was queer—both his desire to get the sum in cash, and his idea that I should countersign his check. I wouldn't have had to do that. He could get anything up to half a million downstairs without special ar-

rangement. But I scribbled my initials on the check and . . ."

"Just a minute," said Keane. "Did he bring the check here already made out?"

Mercer shook his head.

"He wrote it out here on my desk, before my eyes. He waved it a minute or two to dry the ink, disregarding a blotter I passed him and then handed it to me."

"It was his signature, all right?"

"Oh, yes! No doubting it!"

"Go on."

"Kragness went out with the check and cashed it downstairs. I thought about it a lot. Why should he want all that in cash? The obvious idea was that he might be blackmailed or something. But he didn't look like a man under a strain; he was cheerful, laughing. And I certainly couldn't question the genuineness of a check made out here in front of me.

"I THOUGHT NO more about it, then—till two days later. Then Dombey came in and went through the same rigmarole, only with a check for two hundred thousand dollars. After that the flow started.

"Kragness came in again, and Dombey, and then Case, and finally Weldman. All well known to me. The four of them cashed check after check, all for big sums. Never did any of the four seem worried or terrified, as they would have been if they were buying their way clear from some sort of danger. Yet—all those checks!

"I was certain something was wrong. But I couldn't put my finger on it. In each case the check was written here in the office by the man himself. Each man denied that anything was wrong, when I exceeded my rights and asked them bluntly.

"I went so far as to put a private detective on the trail of one of them, Dombey—though for heaven's sake don't ever let anybody know that. The detective reported that Dombey met no suspicious characters. He went home with his money, where he seemed cheerful and unalarmed. His wife and daughter are away in Europe, you know . . ."

"I know," said Keane grimly. He glanced at the clock again. "Each man made out each check here, before your eyes, so that you could testify that nothing could possibly be wrong . . ."

"Testify?" said Mercer quickly.

"Let it go," said Keane. "We'll put it this way: each check is beyond suspicion, and you, the president of the bank, could swear to it. Which is an important part of the game."

"Game? Come, Keane! Tell me what's wrong?"

"It's too soon, Mercer. Tell me one more thing. You say each of these four men is known to you personally. You couldn't possibly be fooled by somebody made up to represent them?"

"Not possibly!" said Mercer. "Besides, there were the checks, made out in their handwriting while I watched."

"The four seemed absolutely normal to you?" Keane persisted.

Mercer hesitated for a full minute before he answered that. Then his voice was a little strained, a little chilled.

"Normal? That's a hard word to define. Each of them was undoubtedly the man he said he was. The four who came in here, and between them have drawn several millions in the last two weeks, were certainly Dombey, Kragness, Case and Weldman. And each seemed cheerful and without worries. And yet . . ."

"Well?" prompted Keane as the man stopped.

"Well, in spite of all that they didn't seem what I would call 'normal'. It's hard to describe it. And I can't, as applied to them. I can only tell my own reactions."

He moistened his lips, and stared past Keane at the blank office wall.

"There was something the matter with those men, Keane! All the time I talked to each of them, I could feel it. A sort of chill along my spine—a feel of horror." He tried to laugh. "I used to feel that way when I was a boy and passed near a cemetery at night. That's all I can tell you, Keane. I'm afraid it isn't much."

"It's a lot," contradicted Keane. He got up, eyes icy with growing knowledge. "A lot! Thanks, Mercer."

He left the bank. Four men

who seemed without worries—but who cashed large checks as though being bled by some criminal ring! Four who seemed normal at first glance—but who made the bank president feel as he had felt when near a graveyard as a boy!

Keane went to the presidents' offices of the five other big banks in which the four men had large deposits, but from which none had drawn money in the past two weeks. He found what he had thought he would find.

On the desks of none of the five executives was there anything corresponding to the onyx electric clock on that of Mercer. Their desks were bare of all but papers.

IN HIS BIG library, to which none gained admittance save after searching preliminaries, the frosted glass television screen on his ebony desk glowed softly. The face of Beatrice Dale was reflected.

He pressed a button and the door swung open. Beatrice came in. He stared inquiringly at her. She was dressed in street clothes and had evidently just come in.

"I've just come from Mr. Weldman's home," she said. "I talked to a maid there. The servants are terrified, of course, at the death of the valet."

Keane nodded impatiently. "They would be, naturally. But

Weldman! How about him? How does he act?"

Beatrice caught her red lip between her teeth.

"He acts cheerful, absolutely normal. In fact, he seems almost too cheerful after the murder of his man. Certainly he seems in no danger, nor does he act like a man who is being blackmailed."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, I saw him for a moment from the servants' wing. I got just a glimpse. But, Ascott"—her voice sank—"I had the most uncanny sensation when I saw him! There's something about that man—something . . ." She stopped with a shudder.

"Go on," said Keane gently.

"It's impossible to put into words. He frightens me. I don't know why. And it isn't exactly fright—it's horror."

"Do the servants feel the same way about him?"

The girl touched her burnished, red-brown hair distractedly. "Yes. They're a little afraid of him without knowing why. Several are leaving, because of the valet's death, they say; but I'm sure that vague feeling of horror is part of their going."

Keane's large, firm mouth tightened. His strong fingers clenched a little. But his voice was even as he said; "The rest of the report, please. You saw the bar-

bers I listed, and talked to the other valets?"

"Yes. I talked to the barbers in the four buildings where Dombey, Case, Kragness and Weldman have their suites of offices. And I talked to the valest of Kragness, Case and Dombey. None of them has shaved any of the four in the past two weeks."

Her face colored a little. "It seemed a silly question to ask them, Ascott. But I know you must have had a good reason for telling me to inquire about it."

"I did," said Keane. "The best. The answer to that question clears up in my mind almost the last of the mystery of Doctor Satan's latest crime methods—precisely how he is draining the fortunes of these rich men."

Beatrice shook her head, bewildered. "Perhaps it's clear to you. I certainly can't understand it! And I can't understand what it is that takes place in Doctor Satan's mind! He is master of a hundred secrets of nature unknown to all others, save perhaps you. He could get all the money he wanted, if he chose, without these dreadful crime plots."

KEANE LOOKED at her with his gray eyes reflecting a knowledge of the motives of men that was far beyond the knowledge other mortals could glean from human contacts.

"You don't look at it from the right angle, Beatrice. Money? It isn't money alone Doctor Satan wants. He has more than enough of that without plotting for it. It's the game itself he is after. The grisly, stark game of plundering his fellow men of their fortunes and souls and lives—solely for the thrill of conquering them. Of course he must get the money, too; one of the rules of his game is that his crimes must pay. But the fact that he is not purely a money-grabbing criminal is what makes him so infinitely dangerous. That, and his learning."

His voice lowered, and into it crept the resolution that had tempered the steel of his nature since first he had heard of the ruthless, cold-blooded individual who chose to dress in the devil's masquerade and call himself all too appropriately, Doctor Satan.

"But I'm going to stop him, Beatrice! It may cost me my life, but the cost will come *after* the purchase—which is the destruction of Doctor Satan!"

He smiled, and his voice returned to normal. "However, histrionics won't catch him will they? It takes work and persistence to do that. Such work as the sifting of news items, for example. And I think I have one here that is to prove very, very important."

He took from a drawer a half-page cut from the society section. It pictured three people, a woman

with a granite chin and gray hair like cast iron in a wave over her forehead; a girl who was a replica of her; and a foppishly handsome young man with a harassed look.

"Mrs. Corey Magnus, wife of the financier, is sailing at midnight tonight for England with her daughter, Princess Rimova, and her son-in-law, the prince, last of the Borsakoffs. They will be received at court . . ."

Keane stared long at the pictures and the text.

"Another wealthy man living without his family for a time. Corey Magnus. And all the others were left alone by their families before beginning their cash withdrawals . . ."

He put the clipping carefully away; and in his eyes was pity as well as stony resolve; he knew that another man had been marked by Doctor Satan.

4

IN THE HOME of Corey Magnus at nine next evening, Magnus's private secretary opened the library door and almost tiptoed in. He walked softly to the fireplace, in front of which was standing a tall, heavy-set, imposing-looking man with gray hair and slate-gray eyes who stared with a frown at the leaping flames.

The secretary's bearing expressed the deference due the man

who was Chairman of the Board of the American Zinc Corporation, president of the New York & Northwestern Railway, president of the New York Consolidated Trust, and many other huge financial and industrial groups.

"Mr. Bowles, of the Gull Oil Corporation, is here to see you, Mr. Magnus," he said.

Magnus's slate-colored eyes turned on him. "Ask Bowles to wait for a moment. I don't feel very well . . . a touch of dizziness . . . But don't tell him that!"

The secretary nodded and went out, closing the doors of the library behind him. He was looking worried and perplexed. Asking a man like Bowles to wait! Even Corey Magnus might be sorry he had done that.

Behind him, his employer stared dully at the closed door, and then back at the flames in the fireplace. His eyes contracted as though he were in pain. He swayed a little, and caught at the mantelpiece for support.

The open French doors leading to his garden caught his gaze. He walked toward them, breathing deeply of the chill fall air. Small beads of perspiration studded his forehead, and his heavy face was pale.

He walked out of the doors.

His head was bent forward on his thick neck, and he looked intent, almost rapt, as though some-

thing called him from out there and he must find out what it was.

It was ten minutes later when his secretary came back into the library again, not daring to keep Bowles waiting longer. He saw that the room was empty, and went to the open French doors.

The garden was empty too. He rushed back to give an alarm—and saw something he had missed before. A note on the library table.

Send Bowles away, the note read. Tell him I'm ill and will see him in the morning at his office. You may go home, yourself. C.M.

The secretary bit his lip. No word in the note as to where his employer had gone so abruptly! No explanations of any sort!

But the brisk letter was indubitably in Magnus's handwriting. There was nothing for him to do but obey its commands.

UNDER THE little cemetery, in the rocklined chamber, Girse and Bostiff, servants of Doctor Satan were busy.

More lamps had been lit. Now the room was brightly illuminated with garish red light. In the brighter illumination the cages along the end wall showed plainly: the one empty cage, the occupant of which had been consumed by the trapped lightning in the next chamber, and the three occupied cages.

The figures in these cages, seen in detail under the better light, would have astounded the city in the heart of which this chamber was buried. Naked, disheveled, gaunt with hunger and mottled with cold, they were Edward Dombey, John Weldman and Shepherd Case, men among the two per cent who controlled four-fifths of the wealth of the country.

The empty cage had belonged to Harold Kragness.

Girse, with ape-like movements, was clearing out the empty cage. Bostiff, with a look of awe and fear on his bovine face, was stirring something in a large metal bowl.

It was curious stuff he stirred, faintly phosphorescent, like a colorless, opaque jelly. It clung to the pestle and, once, splashed sluggishly high enough to touch Bostiff's hand. When this happened, he exclaimed aloud and shook the stuff off his flesh, to land in the bowl and mingle with the rest.

Girse sneered at the exclamation. "What are you afraid of, you ox?"

"This—this stuff in the bowl," Bostiff rumbled. "It's kind of alive!"

"Sure it's alive," chuckled Girse, keeping his distance from the bowl. "It's this here proto—protoplasm, Doctor Satan said. The junk you're made of, and me, and everybody else."

"I don't like it," said Bostiff, leaving off his stirring.

"I do! Anything that brings in the cash that stuff brings, I like a lot. God, Doctor Satan's smart!"

"Smart?" Even to Bostiff's limited intelligence the word seemed feeble; but he could supply no other. "Smart enough to know everything we think or say. And to kill us if we don't think the right thing."

Girse nodded, his ape-like grin fading. He had seen his red-robed master read treachery in one man's thoughts, and kill him in a blue flame the only materials for which were mysterious powdered chemicals in a little heap.*

The ape-like man started to say something, then stopped. The red lamp near the door was winking on and off, on and off. He opened the door and went down the passage revealed.

"Bostiff!" The voice came from a distance.

The legless giant hitched his way out of the chamber and down the tunnel to join Girse. Beside Girse, at the foot of the shaft down which the broad tombstone slid as an elevator, was a motionless figure. A heavy-set, important-looking man who was breathing stertorously but was obviously unconscious.

*See *Doctor Satan*, STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES #2, Fall 1966.

"Corey Magnus!" Bostiff rumbled. "I've seen him many a time in his private car when I worked on the New York & Northwestern Railroad! That's where I lost my legs. So he's the next! It'll be a pleasure to handle *him*."

Even Girse paled a little at the dull ferocity in Bostiff's eyes.

The two of them dragged Magnus to the chamber and shut the door. There, working with the method of those who have performed the work before and know in advance every move, they began a strange series of tasks.

Girse hopped agilely to a box beside the metal mixing-bowl in which Bostiff had stirred the protoplasm, afraid of it, but having no conception of the marvel of it. From the box Girse took moistened, pulped papier-mache.

He pressed a thin blob of it over Magnus's unconscious face. It slowly hardened there. As it did so, Bostiff stripped the man, leaving his slightly paunchy body bare and white in the cold underground chamber.

Bostiff moved with the clothes to the row of figures leaning against the wall near the door like life-sized dolls. And now it could be seen that there were five figures leaning there instead of four.

One of the figures was naked; and its nudity revealed a fact about itself and the clad four beside it that was the most startling thing

about the underground room. These were not mechanical things—dolls the size of men and dressed in men's clothes. These were corpses; bodies; dead men, perfectly preserved but nevertheless as dead as last year's leaves!

Bostiff, handling the corpse as though it were a thing of wood, clothed it in the garments of Corey Magnus. And Girse, after feeling the papier-mache sheet over the unconscious man's face to make sure it had hardened properly, carefully lifted it off.

He held in his hands a perfect mask of the millionaire.

THE RED LIGHT next to the door winked again. But it was a different signal this time. Instead of winking on and off at random, it blinked twice, hesitated, then blinked three times.

"Doctor Satan!" said Girse. "Is everything ready for him?"

"Everything is ready," said Bostiff, leaning the freshly clad corpse against the wall.

The door opened, slowly, as though no hand had touched it. A step sounded in the passage. Into the room came Doctor Satan, red-robed and gloved, with the crimson light reflecting dully from his red mask and the skull-cap with the mocking, Luciferian horns on it.

An instant Doctor Satan stood within the doorway, black eyes glaring at the two who served him

so well. Then he swung the door shut behind him with an impatience of movement that made Bostiff and Girse glance apprehensively at each other.

Doctor Satan was in a rage. They knew the signs.

"Has all gone well, Master?" said Girse, timidly.

The coal-black eyes behind the mask narrowed as if their owner would ignore the question of an underling. Then the mask moved with words.

"You have the man, Magnus, whom I directed here in the little death of hypnotism. Doesn't that mean that all has gone well? And yet . . ."

Doctor Satan strode to the unconscious, stripped financier.

"All has not gone well," he said at last. "Keane escaped the lightning, and he was not in his home awhile ago when I went there to deal personally the death he has avoided so far. Keane . . . A man in my own position—wealthy, learned, making an avocation of crime prevention as I have made a pastime of crime.

"The ancient Greek theory had it that every force that reared in the world soon found an equal, opposing force rearing against it as an antidote. Can that be true? Has some high Providence observed my rise, and in the observing prepared for me an antago-

nist like Ascott Keane? But, no! There is no God, no higher Providence. Keane is an accident—an opponent more dangerous than most, but still one to be destroyed by me almost at will!"

The red-clad figure strode to the cages. Doctor Satan stood with folded arms, staring at the three men who cowered within them at his near approach.

"And you are three of the world's great," Doctor Satan's quietly glacial tone lashed them. "Observe! Three who thought themselves all-powerful! Cringing here like animals in a cage! But I am more powerful than any other, though the world does not yet know that."

The three men cowered lower. Doctor Satan turned abruptly.

"The mask is prepared? The body matching Magnus's body in height and weight and build is prepared? But yes—I see it is so clad, and the garments fit it well. Bring me the mask, and the bowl."

He bent over Corey Magnus. Bostiff and Girse went to the corner and came back with the bowl of protoplasm, and the papier-mache mask.

Working with deft, gloved fingers, Doctor Satan began a process of scientific sculpture the methods and materials of which transcended anything yet known in science, art, or plastic surgery.

AT A NOD from Doctor Satan,¹ Bostiff hitched his great body over to the newly clad corpse, dragged it down, and carried it to him with one huge hand under the dead man's belt.

He laid it beside the unconscious financier. Doctor Satan carefully placed the mask over the dead face, and thrust a small tube into the bowl of living substance. The other end of the tube was placed between the mask and the dead face.

No process of siphoning was begun as far as Girse of Bostiff could see. Yet the level of the protoplasm lowered steadily in the bowl as the jelly-like stuff flowed sluggishly up the tube and under the mask.

After a while the level ceased to sink in the bowl, and Doctor Satan stood up.

"It is done. Tomorrow another industrial giant shall go to the bank and draw out the first of many blocks of cash."

He removed the mask, and even Girse and Bostiff, who had seen such things before, gasped aloud.

The face of the dead man was the face of Corey Magnus!

Doctor Satan's coal-black eyes fixed themselves on the altered face of the corpse. His gaze was electric, compelling, mystic.

"Magnus," he said, "for from

now on you are Magnus—rise!"

The man, lying there nameless in oblivion, was dead. That was beyond questioning. His flesh was cold and stiff. For many hours the heart had not beat.

But—the body rose slowly, stiffly, at Doctor Stan's word.

Doctor Satan's eyes impaled the dead eyes of the moving, standing corpse.

"Smile," he said.

The dead lips, altered with the protoplasm, moved in a smile. It was the wolfish grin of Corey Magnus, pictured many a time in cartoons.

"Speak. What is your name?"

"My name," spoke the corpse, "is Corey Magnus."

"I shall tell you silently what you are to do tomorrow," said Doctor Satan. "Then you shall repeat my instructions."

For several minutes, the glittering, coal-black eyes probed the dead eyeballs of the animated body. Then the stiff lips moved.

"I shall go to the United Continental Bank tomorrow. With me I shall have a check written out by the man who lies behind you. I shall take this check to the president's office . . ."

But now a new voice spoke in that underground room, a voice not heard before. One that made Bostiff grunt in amazement, as though he had been struck. One that stiffened Doctor Satan's red-

draped body as if an electric shock had coursed through it.

The voice came from behind Doctor Satan. And its message was as electrifying as its presence in that chamber.

"Let me tell you what the corpse was to do for you tomorrow."

For the space of a heart-beat the silence that chained the room was more terrible than shrieking chaos. Then Satan whirled and stared at the man who had been lying behind him.

The man was sitting up now; and though body and features were those of Corey Magnus, there was something about the eyes . . . something . . .

"Keane!" Doctor Satan whispered. "*Ascott Keane! Here!*"

THE BLACK EYES glared at the head of the man, so different from the lean, hawk face of Keane. Glared amazement—and rage.

"You have altered your face and body with protoplasm! You blundered onto my method of using and creating it . . ."

Keane's voice came again, amazingly, from Magnus's throat.

"That's only one of the many things I've discovered, Doctor Satan. I know all you've done and planned to do.

"Tomorrow that revivified corpse would take a check, made out in advance by Corey Magnus, to the office of the president of

the United Continental Bank. Why to that one bank? Because only on that one presidential desk is there an object—such as an electric clock—behind which your puppet could write with a dry pen over the words and figures already made out by Magnus, and thus seem to write the check fresh "under the very eyes" of the president."

The coal-black eyes glaring at him from the red mask were like living jet, burning with hate. But, relentlessly, Keane went on, slowly getting to his feet as he spoke.

"A clever, if somewhat complicated, scheme, Doctor Satan. But like all complicated plans, it provided its own drawbacks as it went along.

"For one thing, your dead men roused an inexplicable feeling of horror and dread in the minds of observers. They seemed all right, and acted all right—but something chilled those they came in contact with, and that fact was remembered.

"For another thing, there was the matter of their queer actions at home and in their offices. Clever as you are, you couldn't know all the details of their private and business lives, so your masquerading corpses made mistakes sometimes.

"Again, there was the matter of shaving. Hair does not grow on the dead, contrary to superstition. And your mask of living pro-



Illustration by
Vincent Napoli

toplasm, of synthetic flesh, covered the facial hair of the dead who did your bidding. So there was no shaving to be done—to the bewilderment of barbers and valets. It was this that started Weldman's valet to spying around, as a result of which he started for the police, and his death.

"Finally, you had to pick rich

victims who were not living with their families at the moment: No matter how marvelous the disguise, immediate relatives of course could not have been fooled. It was that fact which informed me, when Corey Magnus's family went abroad, that he would probably be next on your list. So I persuaded him to go away secretly

while I took his place. An easy way to find you, wasn't it, Doctor Satan?"

WITH THE FIRES of hell glittering in his jet-black eyes, Doctor Satan had heard Keane out. They flamed like fire opals as he finally spoke.

"An easy way to get here, Ascott Keane. Very easy! But you may find it more difficult to leave."

"I'll take my chance on that," said Keane.

Doctor Satan's red-clad body quivered. "Seize him!"

Girse and Bostiff clutched Keane's arms and held him in apparent helplessness.

"Bind him!"

Rope was wound around Keane's arms and body and pulled so taut that it cut deep into the synthetic flesh with which Keane had built out his hard, firm body to resemble Magnus's pudgier one.

Keane stared at Doctor Satan—and smiled.

Doctor Satan's hand brought from under his red tunic the deadly, crystalline tube.

"The lightning tube!" muttered Bostiff, mouth open stupidly. "But Master, there is no storm tonight. The sky is clear . . ."

"Fool," said Doctor Satan gently, "there is always lightning, and storm, somewhere in the world. And distance makes no difference to *this*."

He thrust the crystalline tube between Keane's bound arm and his side, jet-black eyes flaming with triumph.

"When the next lightning bolt splits the sky, somewhere on Earth," he said, softly, "you die, Keane. That may be in five seconds—it may be in ten minutes. But whenever it comes, death comes with it."

And still Keane smiled.

"You're so sure, Doctor Satan? Under this synthetic flesh on my body there might be something that would astonish you . . ."

The sentence was never finished.

In some far distant place, lightning flared.

And suddenly the underground chamber was ablaze with blue-white light that dazzled the eyes even through closed lids. It was an inferno of light, a soundless, rending explosion of it.

In a blinding sheet it played over the body of Ascott Keane. Played over it—and as suddenly shot away from it at a crackling right angle!

Girse screamed and Bostiff roared like a lanced bull as a little of the tremendous current rayed into them. But Doctor Satan made no outcry.

The main stream of blue-white death was streaming from Keane's body—straight into the red-clad figure!

Doctor Satan's body convulsed

at the touch. A smell of burning fabric filled the room, to mingle with the acrid odor of burned ozone.

And then Doctor Satan was down, with sheet after sheet of lightning bathing Keane in harmless radiance and streaming from him to plunge into the writhing red figure on the floor.

KEANE'S BONDS were burned away by the force he had redirected. Some of the synthetic flesh over his abdomen was charged from him, revealing part of a crystalline plate, like armor over his body.

He dropped Doctor Satan's tube, which smashed on the floor, and leaped over the moaning figures of Girse and Bostiff toward the cages in which three men screamed pleas for help.

From the walls and roof of the low room bits of rock and earth were falling, loosened by the lightning bolts. The very floor seemed to sway under his feet.

He opened the cages. "Run!" he shouted. "Run!"

The three staggered to the door and into the passage, with Keane behind them. At his touch on a concealed projection, the tombstone from the cemetery above sank down to get them . . .

With a soft roar the earth behind them caved in, burying many feet deep the passage between them

Bizarre—Frightening Gruesome

THE LAST OF
PLACIDE'S WIFE
by
Kirk Mashburn

THE RED
WITCH
by
Nictzin Dyalhis

GROUND AFIRE
by
Anna Hunger

THE WIND IN
THE
ROSE-BUSH
by
Mary Wilkins-Freeman

*don't miss the
January issue of
MAGAZINE OF
HORROR*

and the room in which they had left Doctor Satan, Girse and Bostiff, and the five dead men who had served Satan's turn.

The passage shuddered and quivered. Air from the cave-in screamed about their ears. The four clung to one another for support.

Then, in the racking silence succeeding the pandemonium, they stared at each other in the faint light of the stars coming down the black pit.

"The end of Doctor Satan," breathed John Weldman at last. "Thank God for that!"

But Ascott Keane said nothing. He was remembering that in the burned patches of Doctor Satan's

red robe he had seen some crystalline stuff; and he knew that was armor such as he himself had devised against the lightning's bolt. Not as impervious as his own, perhaps—letting some of the current through to convulse the man's body—but still saving him from death.

The cave-in? That could not have harmed Doctor Satan. He must have constructed the chamber to resist the lightning shocks, because he drew them there himself. Only the passage between the room and the end of the tunnel could have collapsed.

So Keane said nothing to Weldman. But he knew the truth; neither lightning nor cave-in had killed Doctor Satan.



the cauldron

NOW AND THEN someone asks me, "Do you know what happened to the Fortean Society?", and I've been queried thus both by lovers of imaginative fiction and followers of psychic phenomena, etc., who read *EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN*. Up to a week or so ago (this is being typed in mid-August), all I could do was shrug. Then in came the second issue of *ANUBIS*, a neatly-gotten up, 60 page magazine mimeographed by Paul J. Willis, Route #1, Box 156, Festus, Missouri 63115, containing, among many other items, an article by Robert Barbour Johnson entitled "Charles Fort and a Man Named Thayer". This gives an account of the Fortean Society from the vantage point of a member of the San Francisco branch of the Society, and relates how the organization became a one-man show, under the sole rule of Tiffany Thayer — one which went out like a light when Thayer died in 1959. You can obtain a copy of this publication from Mr. Willis at 50c the copy, while the supply lasts.

Mr. Willis is also Secretary of the newly-formed International Fortean Organization, and Editor of the *INFO JOURNAL*, which is the official organ of the society. So far, I have seen

only one issue, Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 1967, and do not know whether (as often happens with amateur publications) it appeared late, or if a Summer issue actually exists by now. It is planned as a quarterly magazine; but you must remember that such ventures are engaged in for love, rather than money. It is rare that an issue (this one has 51 pages, with the same neat and careful get-up that characterizes *ANUBIS*) does better than pay its expenses. Most do not pay expenses, and their tenure depends upon the publisher's available time and funds to devote to his hobby. It would be well to query Mr. Willis as to the price of membership in the society (which includes the annual subscription cost of the Journal) as he notes that after the third issue appears, the price will have to be raised; if you get in before then, it's \$3.00.

As to the content of the first issue, I have not had a chance to read it, but it looks promising; and the issue contains numerous drawings and photographs relating to the opening article, "Man and the Mammoth In the Americas", by Ronald J. Willis. The general impression I receive from glancing through the magazine is that it is put together not only with love,

but with care and discrimination and a reasonable amount of research. Whether the material also shows the sense of humor that makes Fort fascinating as well as outrageous is something yet to be determined. My own impression of the original Fortean Society (without knowing anything about the eccentricities of Thayer) was one of tedious grimness. Fort did not take himself and his hobby and theorizing seriously—while, alas, many of the Forteans are all too earnest.

P. J. Andrews writes from Brooklyn, "The comments on the difference between the Template and the Evolutionary series in fiction were very interesting. The main trouble with a series like the TV Perry Mason or the prose Jules de Grandin is that if you're really going to enjoy the latest one you read, you have to sort of forget that you have seen or read the others. Otherwise you begin to wonder why Hamilton Burger manages to remain District Attorney when he never wins a conviction against Mason, or why Dr. Trowbridge is just as incredulous about any and all supernormal manifestations as he was the very first time his adventures with his French comrade brought him face-to-face with them.

"Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed de Grandin and Trowbridge years back when I first read them, and they somehow manage to stay enjoyable. And it's nice to see some that I never did get hold of before, like *The Tenants of Broussac*. But I do think that what I just mentioned may be one of the reasons why Mr. Quinn, while awfully good in his own way, isn't closer to Conan Doyle in stature so

far as widespread popularity goes—why the de Grandin stories aren't available in soft cover books. I don't think it's just a matter of so many of them being about various kinds of "supernatural" creatures, though I guess that accounts for part of it. Holmes had a few pretty weird cases, but most of them were "natural" in a bizarre sort of way. But the thing is that Watson did learn a little as he went along, while Trowbridge seems to get more stupid. And now that I'm thinking of it, it does seem that a single town in New Jersey that had as many supernormal manifestations as Harrisonville is suppose to have in this series, even though all the stories don't take place there, would at the very least gain a national and maybe even international reputation in a few years and show the effect of it.

"Well, it doesn't really matter too much. I see by the readers' comments that these stories are still liked up to 35 years after, in a time when science is more of an idol than ever before and materialism more entrenched than ever. Back in the 20's, I'll bet a lot of readers found some of the de Grandin tales real scary. Apparently a lot of readers find them enjoyable today even if hardly anyone shudders at the psychic and supernormal irritations. On the other hand, something like *The House of Horror* is just as gruesome in 1967 as it was in 1925."

Even back in the 30s there were readers of *WEIRD TALES* who applauded the de Grandin stories but objected to Trowbridge's invincible ignorance. I remember letters to the editor urging a story—just one!—wherein de Grandin turned out to be

Coming Next Issue

"Brought back to life? By whom?"

"By Doctor Curtlin here. I remember dying, and between that and the time I woke up in Curtlin's laboratory yesterday, there is nothing in my mind but darkness."

Todd stared, stunned, from one to the other. Curtlin smiled. "Don't look so dazed, Todd," he said. "Every great scientific discovery of the past has seemed just as incredible to those who first heard of it as this seems to you."

Farley's mind was working again "Doctor Curtlin—I remember now, he exclaimed. "You're the physician who kicked up the stir in medical circles two years ago with a claim that you could rebuild and revivify disintegrating life-cells by a new combination of rays."

"That is the basis of my process," Curtlin admitted. "Naturally, I am not going to give its details to anyone."

"But you took Clay's body from the tomb," said the awed reporter. "You brought him back to life with that process—"

The voice of the woman behind him interrupted him. "Then you *were* dead, Howard. I knew that you were—I knew—"

Clay's face softened. "I was, but I am living now, Helen," he said. "I would have spared you this shock if I could have." He took a step toward her.

"Don't come near me!" she screamed. "You can't be living now when you say yourself that you were dead. . . ."

"Helen—I *am* living," Clay insisted. "I *did* die, but I've been brought back to life just as an unconscious man is brought back to consciousness."

"I only know that you died and were buried!" she cried. "I won't stay here with you. I'm going to leave this house now!"

"Helen, do I mean nothing more to you than that?" Clay pleaded. "Does the twenty years we lived together mean nothing?"

"I lived those years with a living man," she said unsteadily. "I can't—I can't live with a dead one." She turned and stumbled from the hall . . .

What Was The Bizarre And Eerie Secret That Lay Behind

THE THREE FROM THE TOMB

by EDMOND HAMILTON

utterly and disastrously wrong, while good old Trowbridge solved the mystery and saved the day. (Reminds me of the instances wherein Holmes achieved something less than complete success; these did help to leaven the great man's occasionally tiresome conceit.) Whether Mr. Quinn was ever tempted to take up this suggestion I do not know, but I do think that he was wise not to do it. To have had de Grandin utterly fail in one story, I think, would have been as devastating as the death of Holmes in *The Final Problem*; and I doubt that the readers who suggested this would have been pleased.

Clay Harper writes from Delaware: "Death From Within was a real weirdie. I can't decide which is better in the Fall issue—that story or *My Lady of the Tunnel*. Call it a tie. I hope readers aren't still objecting when you run a story from an old science fiction magazine. What if *Death From Within* IS science fiction? Why should anyone care? There's a real mystery there in the story and it's startling. It's strange and unusual and eerie. It gave me more of a shudder than the undead in *The Dark Castle* or the usurping personality in *Dona Diabla*—though that story is almost as good as the two top ones. I also got an uneasy feeling from visualizing that room with the glass floor in—oh, that was the title of the story, wasn't it?"

Gene D'Orsogna's comments on *The Gods of East and West* (to which we referred last time) were: "*The Gods of East and West* was, to my mind, substandard for both Mr. Quinn and deGrandin—oh, all the elements of typical de Grandin were to be found here (the hopelessly ill patient, the atrocity of nature, the Frenchman's matter-of-fact explanation of the goings-on), but the French sleuth hardly took part in the solving of the case at all. Don't get me wrong, the story was well done and intriguing, but I think de Grandin was forced into a back seat here. (Perhaps at the time of the creation of this piece, Mr. Quinn was attempting to ease the Frenchman out of his fiction.) I found it interesting to note that de Grandin seemed to be acting as a 'mouthpiece' for several semi-standard jabs at religion. Although de Grandin's observations are as true as they were forty years ago, I could not help but feel that these asides to Dr. Trowbridge *et al* were interesting, but detracted from the forward motion of the story."

John Kerlsson writes from Missouri: "I enjoy reading the letters or excerpts in *The Cauldron*, and *It Is Written . . .* but why do just a few readers have a monopoly? Readers D'Orsogna and Hidley express themselves well enough, but don't you think a variety of names would be better?"

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The point, Friend Kerlsson, is that a few readers like Messers D'Orsogna Hidley, Ashley, etc. write us letters and send them in early. Most of the responses come later, or on the preference coupons without much comment. This is very helpful in scoring an issue; but when we are ready to make up *The Cauldron* (which we have to do only a few weeks after the last issue went on sale) we must either make use of what has come in on that most recent issue or go back through the comments on earlier issues. While we try to stick as close as possible to the last issue each time, so far as discussion of definite stories is concerned, general comments are good at any time; so we combine the two.

And the reason why some names appear regularly is that these readers write regularly and interestingly, often going into detail as to why they found a particular story good or not so good. We'll happily increase the variety of comment if more readers will comment sooner.

Marion Hope writes from Florida: "I never heard of Beverly Haaf before I read her story in your Fall issue, but I sure hope that she isn't a one-shot writer for you. *Aim For Perfection* hit me just right, and I liked the very thing that I'll bet some readers will complain about—ambiguity. One minute it seems clear and then the next I start to wonder if I really got it. I wouldn't want to see her do this sort of thing every time, but I do hope you'll run some more stories by her. If they're as good as this, I mean."

"Please put my vote down against running the titles of verses or poems

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THE GRAY
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#2, Fall 1966: *The House of Horror*, Seabury Quinn; *The Men in Black*, John Brunner; *The Strange Case of Pascal*, Roger Eugene Ulmer; *The Witch Is Dead*, Edward D. Hoch; *The Secret of the City*, Terry Carr and Ted White; *The Street (verse)*, Robert W. Lowndes; *The Scourge of B'Moth*, Bertram Russell.

#3, Winter 1966/67: *The Inn of Terror*, Gaston Leroux; *The Other*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; *The Door of Doom*, Hugh B. Cave; *A Matter of Breeding*, Ralph Hayes; *Esmerelda*, Rama Wells; *The Trial for Murder*; Chas. Dickens & Chas. Collins; *The Blood-Flower*, Seabury Quinn.

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#5, Summer 1967: *The Gods of East and West*, Seabury Quinn; *The Council and The House* (verse), Robert A. W. Lowndes; *Behind the Curtain*, Leslie Jones; *A Game of Chess*, Robert Barr; *The Man From Nowhere*, Edward D. Hoch; *The Darkness on Fifth Avenue*, Murray Leinster.

#6, Fall 1967: *My Lady of the Tunnel*, Arthur J. Burks; *The Glass Floor*, Stephen King; *Death From Within*, Sterling S. Crammer; *A Vision* (verse), Robert E. Howard; *Aim for Perfection*, Beverly Haaf; *The Dark Castle*, Marion Brandon; *Dona Diabla*, Anna Hunger; *The Druid's Shadow*, Seabury Quinn.

Order From Page 128

on the rating sheet," writes E. M. Foster from Alabama. "I've got nothing against weird poetry, even if most of it isn't very good. Howard's OK in that department. But I'd only rate a poem by him better than a story if I thought the story was real punk. So no one who writes the verses in SMS has much of any chance with me, which isn't exactly fair."

We're taking note of just about what percentage of active readers actually rate verse as against those who do not bother, or who object specifically, as you do. And on that basis, we'll decide whether the practice should be continued. Thus far, the response seems to be pretty much against it.

Maria Schmidt writes from Connecticut: "I like the Jules de Grandin stories and the Simon Ark stories, but there's one thing about Mr. Quinn's series that I like better and that is that I can't be sure in advance whether the story I'm about to read is going to be supernatural or just straight eerie mystery, while with Simon Ark I know that there is going to be a natural explanation for everything. Can't you get Mr. Hoch to fool us once in a while by having a real weird something that doesn't turn out to be phoney?"

Well . . . we wouldn't want you to be too sure of anything at all in *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*, except of course that you'll find most of the stories to your liking. And as for Simon Ark—he might come across some genuine supernormal happenings yet! RAWL

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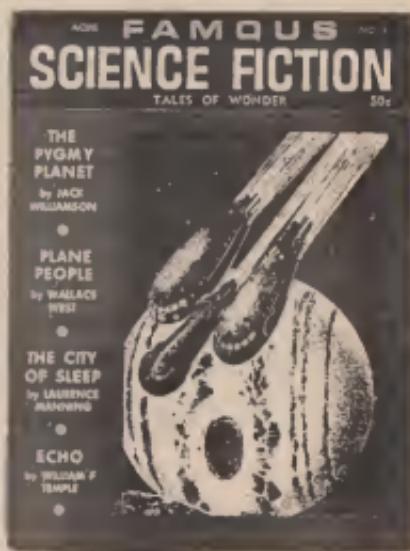
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#2, Spring 1967: "The Moon Menace", Edmond Hamilton; "Dust", Wallace West; "The White City", David H. Keller, M.D.; "Rimghost", A. Bertram Chandler; "Seeds From Space", Laurence Manning.

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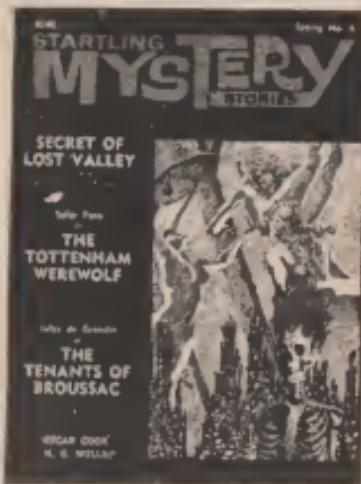
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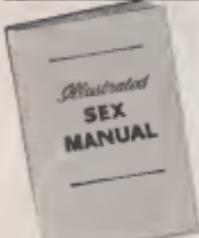
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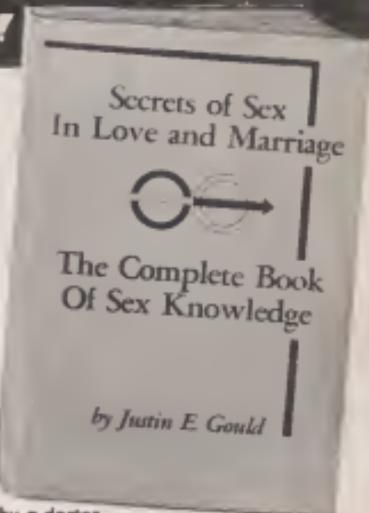
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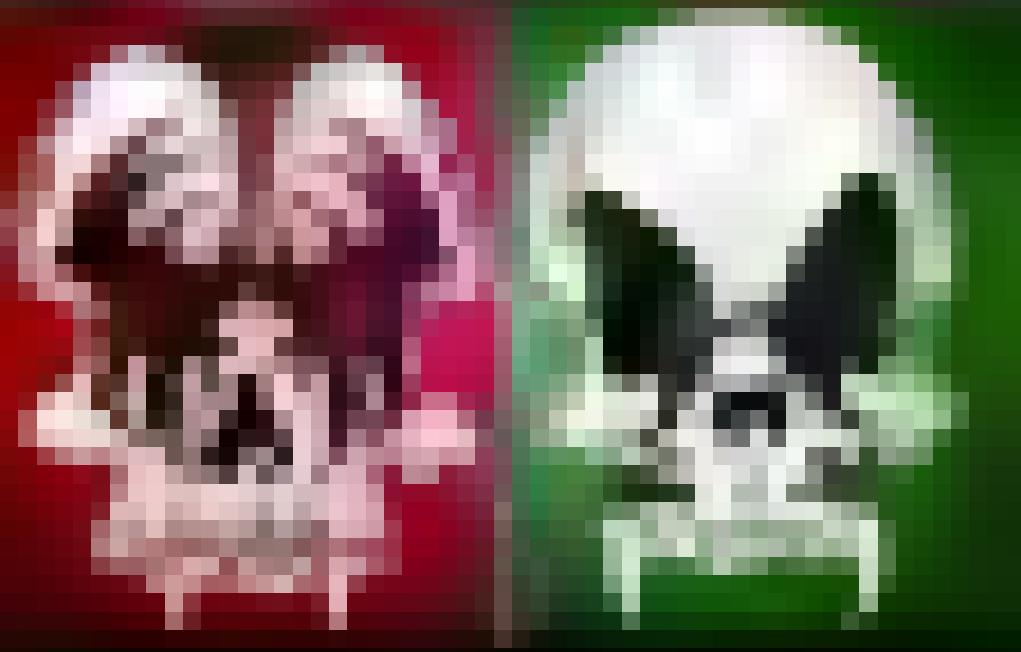
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